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THEIR FRIENDLY ENEMY

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Gordon Grant

THEIR FRIENDLY ENEMY

BY

GARDNER HUNTING
Author of
"Touchdown and After," "Sandsy's Pal," etc.

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1921

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Set up and electrotyped. Published August, 1921.

FERRIS
PRINTING COMPANY
NEW YORK CITY

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THEIR FRIENDLY ENEMY

CHAPTER I

A HARD NUT TO CRACK

"MARAH, it's done!"

"It's done, Hallie!"

"I never quite believed it would be. Even when Mr. Wiles called us up and asked to talk to us, and when your aunt—oh Marah, wasn't she a dear?—when your aunt offered to put in the money. I haven't believed in it at all—till now!"

Hallie Rector's seventeen-year-old head was small and dark, and it had a way of tilting itself on one side like a listening robin's, when its owner was carried out of herself with interest in something else. It was tilted now, as her bright dark eyes held her chum's, across the wide, paper-littered desk between them.

"It's my really big ambition, Marah, and I can hardly believe in its realization. I've al-

ways wanted to—to have a desk, with a lot of fresh white paper on it—and a fat, soft pencil like this—and to write about things and see my own words come out in nice clean black print next day. That isn't a lofty literary ambition, is it? But that's what I really feel—just a love for the white, white paper and the black, black ink—and my own words."

Marah Whittlesey laughed. "That's the creative instinct, my dear. It begins with love of the tools—at least, it does with many people."

"But how *can* you be so calm about it, Marah? It feels like—oh, like Christmas trees and surprise parties to me! It's my orange-skin coach and my glass slipper! Just think, this is our newspaper—yours and mine! And it's a career! And I'll never have to go away from Pentwater and teach! I'll never have to stand behind a counter and measure and sell! And I can have *you* with me all the time and we can *do* things together!"

"It's a very great satisfaction to me."

"Oh, don't the noises and the smells and the feels of things excite you? It's so benziney, and

that press makes such a ringing-bell noise every time it opens, and the clicking that girl makes when she finishes a line of type in the—the stick—it sends the shivers of delight over me, just the way the brass band used to, when the circus parade was coming around the corner. Simply the sight of the dusty squares in the cases and the long, even columns of type on those brass things—the galleys—and that smooth crackly stickiness of the ink spreading between the disk and the rollers! I love it—truly, I do!"

"Maybe you ought to be a printer instead of an editor, honey."

"Oh no! oh no! I *want* to be an editor. I *am* an editor—a really truly editor, after being a make-believe, and dreaming so long! And we are going to make a real paper that people are going to honestly respect—and want and pay real money for it, for us to live on, aren't we?"

The June sun was shining through a wide, dusty, spotty window, from Pentwater's main street, into the private office of the editors of *The Pentwater Clarion.* The rays of it were

sidling softly across the brown desk and the gray floor, as if with a surprised shyness at finding themselves unexpectedly in the presence of strangers in a place of long familiarity, as if—having discovered, instead of a gray, bent old man, who for twenty-odd years had sat at the brown desk, two fresh-cheeked, bright-eyed girls, the older of whom had not seen the passage of more years than twenty—the rays felt highly embarrassed and were inclined to creep away without attracting notice.

The situation had novelty in it, truly. If it had not been exactly a fairy-godmother's doings that had put Marah Whittlesey and Hallie Rector into newspaper editorial chairs in their home town, it had been that curious kind of combination of events that forms what some people call luck—that always astonishing coming-together of the ambitious worker and his opportunity. Yet it was not a real marvel. It was as simple as the feeding of two hungry pigeons who, having learned to use their wings, have found out where corn is and have settled down to enjoy it.

The ladies of the Pentwater Woman's Club, of which Mrs. Endicott Wiles was president, had published a souvenir edition of their home town paper early in June, to raise money for the new Ladies' Library. As Marah Whittlesey, whose father had thought it good for a girl of avowed literary ambitions to get some newspaper experience, had just come home after two years' work for the *Daily News,* at Brighton; as Hallie Rector had just graduated from high school after a year as contributor to, and a year as editor of, her high-school paper; and as the two girls were chums, and were afire with the same spark it was not amazing that Mrs. Endicott Wiles, and other ladies of the club had solicited and secured the services of both. Everybody had worked very hard, including Hallie and Marah, and the souvenir edition had been such a success and such an improvement over *The Clarion* of every week in Pentwater, that many genuine compliments had been forthcoming from the male portion of the community, some of whom were a little tired of Editor James Hersey's spiritless home paper. The spark in

the brains, and the hearts, of the two chums had been blown upon, till it had flamed. They had found out some of the things Pentwater people wanted in a newspaper, and they had discovered that they could supply those things. They had talked a good deal about it, in the home circles, and Marah's older brother Phil, who was a tease, had joked a little, outside the home circle, about "their mirage," as he called it. And suddenly, the thing had ceased to be either a joke or a mirage, because Endicott Wiles himself, husband of the club president, and incidentally, owner of the Local Gas-Electric-Water Company, the principal local banker, and generally the local magnate, had abruptly taken it seriously.

Endicott Wiles was a man who managed people and things. He loved to manage them. He was among those who had not liked James Hersey's unenterprising methods of publishing. Through his wife, he happened to know that the work of Marah Whittlesey and Hallie Rector had been intelligent and that some of the features of the souvenir paper which he had spe-

cially liked, had been the product of their youthful heads. Through Phil Whittlesey, who was associated with his father in the manufacture of advertising novelties at Pentwater and who banked with Mr. Endicott Wiles, the magnate chanced to learn of the chums' ambition. So, being accustomed to swift additions, Mr. Endicott Wiles had put two and two together with astounding suddenness. And he had nearly taken the breath from the mouths and the ground from under the feet of Hallie and Marah by proposing that the two take over *The Pentwater Clarion,* with his financial aid, and make a newspaper of it.

It had been a wonderful red-letter evening, indeed, when he had stopped his big motor-car before Mrs. Rector's small house, at an hour when Marah was there, by appointment through Phil, and had breezily outlined his plan. The girls had been startled by it and half afraid of it at the beginning; then they had been gloriously excited; finally they had become eagerly enthusiastic. And when Mrs. Rector, who needed Hallie's financial help but who under-

stood her ambition, gladly approved and when Mr. Whittlesey later nodded his head in evident gratification over the plan, Mr. Wiles had summarily declared it settled.

It had not been settled so quickly as all that, of course. There had been details to arrange. To begin with Mr. Wiles wanted the girls to own the paper themselves. He said that was because he wanted them to be unhampered in running it. He said he had no desire to hold an interest in it, because he had already enough irons in the fire. But he did want a good paper in his town and would go far to back the right editors. And he was quite certain that he knew the right editors. He made two stipulations, however. One was that the girls were to find a portion of the necessary investment themselves, as large a portion as possible, so that their interest might be genuinely enlisted to make a financial success. He would provide the balance, for which he would take their joint note, secured by the newspaper property itself, and he would promise not to allow them to lose. The other stipulation was that Mr. Wiles' own son,

a somewhat wild and unruly young man of sixteen, should be given at least summer employment as reporter and general assistant. The boy was too young for a share in the management, his father stated, but he was not too young for wholesome hard work. The girls would need a man or boy for some features of the work they could not do, and Mr. Wiles hoped Harry would take to the reporting better than he did to studying.

The second of the banker's conditions was simple, of course. The first had looked like a real and ardor-damping obstacle. Mrs. Rector had no money beyond a tiny income barely sufficient for her needs and Hallie's, so far; and Mr. Whittlesey's capital was just then invested almost to the last dollar in his own business. But Marah's aunt, Miss Jennie Lawrence, had suddenly made naught of that matter, by offering to lend the two girls a thousand dollars from a little store of savings of her own, because she wanted them to have the opportunity. And so she had put the finishing touch upon the combination that formed their luck. James Hersey

had been bought out by Endicott Wiles, with his own and Aunt Jennie's money, and the old editor had shaken the dust of Pentwater from his shoes. And the marvel was accomplished: Hallie and Marah owned *The Pentwater Clarion.*

The shop occupied a room the width of an ordinary "store" front on the main street and was of somewhat more shallow depth than most stores. It was the typical country printing office, with its type-cases on their sloping stands in one big front window and the editors' sanctum, divided off by a thin wooden, three-quarters partition, in the other; with two imposing stones, end to end across the middle of the big room, two Gordon job-presses, one small cylinder news-press and a motor to run them, behind the stones; and with another pair of case-stands, a lead and furniture case or two, a pair of galley-racks, a sink for roller- and form-washing, and a hand-power paper-cutter to make up the conspicuous portions of the rest. All was in fairly good condition, and in this environment worked three printers: Dick Sanderson, foreman, short

of stature, sandy of complexion and steady of habits; Carey Trottle, journeyman printer, tall, dark and not so steady; and Rene—perhaps once Irene—Stiver, compositor.

Of sounds and smells and "feels," to appeal to a young girl of live senses, to whom these were the symbols of cherished ambitions, *The Clarion* office produced its share. Also, being the only newspaper in Pentwater and having the only considerable job-printing outfit, it was a really promising producer of income, under proper management. Mr. Wiles himself, controlling the principal bank and the Gas-Electric-Water Company of the town, was more or less dependent on *The Clarion's* job-office. Several merchants in town were good advertisers, a candy manufacturer, a carriage factory, a soda-fountain syrup concern, and other firms who used much printers' ink, were among its patrons. Dick Sanderson was a good printer. There was prospect that two bright, energetic girls, who knew everybody in their home town, might make some money and become solidly established.

And Hallie was finding the fact that she was

one of those girls almost too surprising to be credited. It was their first day alone in their office and work was beginning. Thrilled with the touch of actual, live affairs, in which genuine interests of people and real dollars were involved, the girl was feeling a sort of ecstasy. Busy activity had been thrust upon them at once. Dick, his sandy head tousled but his sandy face alight with humorous appreciation of the situation, had been figuring prices on new jobs with Marah; Harry Wiles, somewhat sardonic, but good-humored withal, had already commenced a news and advertisement getting campaign; Hallie herself had found at this very beginning what a tyrant the telephone can be even in a little country newspaper office like *The Clarion's*. And it had been the stimulating influence of all this that had called out the rhapsody, as Marah presently named it.

"Rhapsody indeed!" repeated Hallie, "you are quite as excited as I am only you're trying to look cool and self-possessed and experienced and sophisticated. Don't you know it's not half the fun, if you suppress the rhapsody? Why,

I could squeal, just to be writing how Mrs. Simon Bepper went to Grand Rapids Wednesday, and how Louis Fairchild has bought the Jamisons' milk business, and that there's a bouncing baby boy at the Lionel Carletons'—why do they always bounce, Marah? I've got fourteen personals and eight town-topics, without getting out of my chair this morning. And Mrs. Carey Hargreave's going to give a luncheon Thursday—that's press day, but we'll get in an account of it if we have to work all night—to lead the social colyum-yum-yum. Oh dear, it's so much nicer than selling five cents worth of this and a yard and a quarter of that! And, oh Marah, while Dick is out, tell me what 'grapevine' is. I know 'boiler plate' means the syndicated stereotype stuff that comes by the box. And what are letter-heads, 'blocked'? And is there any plural of printers' pi?"

Marah Whittlesey turned her head and looked past the side of her glasses, with a gesture quite her own. She was a tall, slender, studious-looking girl, with earnest blue-gray eyes, thin, sensitive lips, and brown hair that

curled naturally. She was not much given to rhapsodies on her own account, but she always enjoyed her younger chum's fine frenzies.

"One at a time, love," she answered. " 'Grapevine' is technical for the product of the scissors—for the stuff that newspapers ought to, but do not always, credit to their contemporaries. 'Blocked' letter-heads, are letter-heads made into pads, gummed together at one end like a school scratch-book or pad. And pi —well, when you see printers' pi, I think you'll agree that it's *always* plural. It's spilled type, you know—and it's the saddest thing in the printing business."

Hallie suddenly returned to her pushing of the fat, soft pencil across the fresh paper under her hand. After an instant, she laughed. "I'm already wishing for something big to happen, Marah," she said. "I don't really want a fire or a runaway, but I'd love to describe one if it should happen. And wouldn't it be fine to have some real public question to discuss and write editorials about, that would stir everybody up to talk and take the paper and give us some real

power in the town? Do you think I have a 'nose for news,' chum? Isn't election a long ways away? Shall I write an editorial about the main street pavement? It's bad enough!"

It sounded like play. In a sense it was play. But Hallie was intensely in earnest. Every stroke of the fat pencil was made conscientiously. When she got up from her chair and went to hang her items on the copy-hook at the end of Rene Stiver's case, she handled each of them almost lovingly. She listened to the bump-ty, bump-ty, bump, as Carey Trottle planed a little job-form on the stone while she crossed the floor, and smiled at the sense of useful industry it gave her. She stood beside the small Gordon jobber and watched Dick's seemingly clumsy, but really deft, sandy fingers feed in and take out flimsy strips of paper, while she grew quite excited with the alternate suspense and relief, as each slipped into correct position against the gauge-pins at the last possible instant before the little press shut up on it—with Dick's fingers always barely outside the jaws. She surveyed, with joy in their sleekness, the sleek black letters of a

lot of freshly-printed posters, carefully distributed to dry on the cutter, the spare stone and on the cases in the racks under the stands. She drank in every sensation with delight.

This was the first day—the first of many days of this delightful work. What fun it was going to be! Of course, there would—there must be some disagreeable features, because every sort of work has its drawbacks. She knew that people did not always like what was printed about them, even when editors were carefully on the lookout to please. She knew that the duty of printing the news sometimes raised vexed questions. She knew that employees did not always work faithfully. She was well aware that James Hersey had told them that Carey Trottle, journey-man printer, was not steady, that he sometimes drank and became unfit for work. She knew that there had been a very critical complaint—"a kick," as Dick described it—that very morning, about a typographical error in last week's paper that merely exampled what would inevitably sometimes happen also under the new management, despite the utmost care. She knew

that no editor could hope to please all his readers, all the time, and no printer expected eternally to satisfy the tastes of all his customers. There would be trouble, of course. But the very trouble looked attractive that day.

It was odd, perhaps, when everything looked so much like play on that very first jolly day, that Hallie's "nose for news" should lead to a first strange, even startling beginning of difficulty. It was when she came back from luncheon at home with her much interested and sympathetic mother, that she penciled a fresh item that partially resembled an editorial, and innocently hung it on Rene Stiver's copy-hook. It was not till Dick came into the editorial sanctum at four o'clock with the penciled item in his hand, and a queer, questioning look in his bright-blue eyes, that she had the first premonition of trouble.

"Guess you ain't really wanting to print this, are you?" he asked.

Dick was a character. Two things Hallie had already discovered about him. One was that he loved to whistle hymn-tunes, in a slow, easy, in-

termittent way, while he worked. The other was that, while almost a walking reference work on grammar, spelling and punctuation, he rarely applied his knowledge to his conversation. Her first idea as she looked down at the item, was that it contained an error in English which he was taking this way of pointing out. She read it over carefully.

The grass in High Street Park is already brown and sunburned. Both High and Main Streets are very dusty. Generous sprinkling should commence at once.

It looked harmless enough. She glanced up into Marah's curious eyes, then tossed the item across to her friend.

"What's the matter with it?" she asked.

Dick's eyes widened. "Well, say!" he replied, "I'd be tickled to print it. But what's Endicott Wiles going to say when you stir up the water row again? He didn't put you in here for that, did he?"

Hallie's gaze at Marah became suddenly rather blank. The water row? Why, yes, she remembered. The water row was the controversy over whether the Pentwater Water Com-

pany did or did not furnish an adequate supply at a fair price. It *had* approached the proportions of a row last summer, certainly. Of course, Endicott Wiles, owner of the water company, so severely criticized by Pentwater's citizens, would not want that row stirred up again by *The Clarion*. With that thought alone in her mind and making her blush as if she had just committed an offense against good-breeding, Hallie reached instinctively for her item and crumpled it in her hand, sitting back in hot embarrassment at the notion of her thoughtlessness.

And Dick laughed, with a queer, brutal, knowing sound. "I thought so!" he commented.

"You thought what?" gasped Hallie.

"That this was going to be a throttled paper. I thought I seen what foxy Mr. Wiles was after." He paused; then shook his head with a quizzical grin. "But you can't put it over," he added. "This town knows it's got poor gas, electric and water service, and that it's paying a buster of a price for 'em."

Hallie saw Marah lean back in her chair and

put her fingers together before her chin in sudden thoughtfulness. But Hallie grew a little indignant.

"Well," she cried, suddenly, "what's that got to do with us?"

Dick shrugged. "Nothing," he answered, "if you don't mean to print the news."

He grinned again and then turned slowly to walk out. When he was gone Hallie and Marah sat staring into each other's eyes.

"We needn't concern ourselves with that old fight, surely?" queried Hallie faintly.

"It'll soon be a live fight again, Hallie," answered Marah. "How can a newspaper remain neutral on such a question?"

"I never dreamed of such a point coming up."

"I didn't foresee it, certainly."

"The *Clarion did* attack the Water Company last summer. Do you remember what a fuss—oh, dear, what does this mean to us? We *can't* attack Mr. Wiles!"

"We've *got* to print the news—and discuss public questions about which people are stirred up."

"But what can people *do,* if they *are* stirred up?"

"I don't know. Oh yes, they can give new franchises, build a municipal plant, make ordinances that will drive Mr. Wiles out of business."

"And the water supply *is* bad—it's inadequate, anyway. And the company has a long-time franchise—oh, Marah, I've heard Phil and your father talk about it!"

"I've heard everybody talk about it—but I'd forgotten it. I rather guess, Hallie, that we—that we've got a hard nut to crack."

"Instead of an orange-skin coach," assented Hallie, with sudden heavy unhappiness, in place of buoyant excitement.

"We've got a question to discuss that will 'give us power in our town,' my dear," answered Marah, very slowly. "And are we, or are we not, a throttled newspaper?"

CHAPTER II

NOBODY'S NEWSPAPER

HARRY WILES laid a sheaf of papers on the editorial desk, took off his expensive Panama hat and made a sweeping cavalier bow with his hand over his heart.

"Respectfully submitted, oh ye editors!" he remarked in a repressed tone that suggested triumph.

He was rather small but a hardy young fellow, fair but with plenty of tan, with shrewd, somewhat impudent gray eyes, and lips that were capable of friendly grinning, of pugnacious drawing, and of insolence. Some people of Pentwater were wont to say with frank dislike that Harry Wiles was simply a tough youngster. Some other people liked him. With the boys of the high school foot-ball squad, he was something of a hero, because he had been a whirlwind quarterback and captain.

He had been allowed to run the streets, and

to associate with some of the men and boys of the town who were not of the choicest. He was notoriously a poor student. He was an indulged and not very respectful son, whom his parents apparently did not know how to manage. He spent more money than was good for him. His private ambition was believed, by those who looked askance at him, to be to achieve a reputation as a sport, and many a mother of other Pentwater boys considered that tendency vicious.

But Harry had a curious way of making people, who came closely in contact with him, feel doubtful after a time of their own first unfavorable estimates of him. Marah and Hallie, who had formed opinions based on what they had seen and heard at girls' distance from football-playing, unstudious, unruly boys, found something oddly attractive about the ways of this specimen, before he had been three days at work for them. Some things he said and did made them wince; some made them laugh; and some revealed little glimpses of character under the "sporty" exterior that made them think.

Harry nearly always spoke of his father as "the old man," or as "dad." His tone was never one of veneration. He did not consider his paternal parent as immune from an adolescent son's criticism. He treated his father as an equal, subject to appraisal and able to take care of himself. Some of his remarks about the doings of other older people of the town, too, were so incisive and humorously true that they were telling shots. But Harry was curiously just, was hotly loyal to his family as a whole, and worshiped his mother. And he scorned a lie as he scorned cowardice.

"I got Simon Bepper for a page ad for our first edition," he announced, sitting down and fanning himself with the fine Panama.

"A page!" echoed Marah, her sober face lighting.

"Ye-ah," answered Harry. "Simon loves me, I think not; but he wants to encourage useful indu . So I was the greatest little piece of indus on tin wheels you ever saw, in his store, this morning. I'm all things to all men. I'm the rising young newspaper man just now to Mr.

Bepper, and so Simon's going to boost. That page ad is the first pry off the ground."

"Oh, isn't it lovely!" murmured Hallie, half shocked, half amused at Harry's analysis of the honest old merchant's encouraging attitude toward his new employment. She spread open Harry's sheaf of papers and held up Mr. Bepper's big sheet of carefully prepared announcement of a white-goods sale.

"I also got seven more personals," continued Harry. "That cute little druggist, Perry Gorslick, is as good as a nickel-plated gimlet to get bottled-up folks' affairs out of 'em. I ate a chocolate sundae at eight o'clock this morning and told him his hair looked like Paderewski's —it does, too,—and he began to unthread items faster'n I could write 'em on my cuffs. Say, do I have an expense account, besides my salary —for soda-water personals, and laundry? And say, do you know I haven't even heard how much pay I draw?"

"Didn't your father tell you?" asked Marah.

"No; he's gone out of town. He said you

were my bosses and he hadn't any more to do with me than a lost rabbit."

"He said—five dollars a week," said Marah, hesitantly.

Harry turned the Panama slowly over on his knee. It had cost not less than fifteen. His eyes began to twinkle.

"Isn't it enough?" asked Hallie, anxiously.

"Oh, yes!" replied the boy. "Munificent! I'm just wondering what I'll do with it. I think I'll blow the whole of the first five on—on an automobile."

But he seemed genuinely indifferent. This was the fourth morning of his work and press-day, and he had not asked a question earlier. Now, his eyes began to glow as he pulled the bottom sheet from under the mass he had brought in, and held it out to Hallie.

"Remarks on Pentwater's Gas-Electric-Water Company," he announced. "I've been collecting 'em. Dad's in for it this year. Just wait till the music starts. Some of the folks in this town have got lead pipes up their sleeves this year, I can tell you."

Hallie glanced quickly at Marah. Little had been said between them since the first suggestion about the water controversy had followed her chance item upon sprinkling the lawns. But both girls had been thinking and hearing much.

"Oh," said Harry, noting the exchange of looks, "you're wise, aren't you? Well, say, two or three folks who like to have water in their second-floor bathrooms in July, or who have got a garden-hose and want to 'squirt,' as Wallie Hulett says, have been after me. They think it's funny, asking me if the paper's going to take up the cudgels for the people this year against the water company—or if the cudgels have been put away on the shelf with pink baby-ribbon on 'em."

He paused, grinning. The two young editors were smiling at his metaphors, but there was a wrinkle across Marah's nose just above the bridge and Hallie's eyes were a little wider than usual.

"What does the water company mean to do this year?" asked Marah.

"Don't ask *me!*" returned Harry with a

shrug. "The old man doesn't take me into his heart of hearts, where he keeps his business. You know the water ordinances he got passed two years ago—no lawn sprinkling between eight A. M. and six P. M.; no house-use of water during a fire. They aren't changed any. And the station hasn't any new engines. The status quo is just in the same quo it was last year. The old reservoir will be just as low in August and there will be just as many hollers. And Dad will sit tight and pick off the shekels same as ever was. Oh, he's the great little picker, and the water company is his pet shekel-bush."

Hallie laughed. "What does your mother think?" she asked. Mrs. Endicott Wiles, as president of the woman's club, and therefore presumably in a position of influence and a representative of Pentwater's sentiments, might be expected to have an opinion on this matter.

Harry's face became suddenly a study. "Well," he said, "mother, you see, isn't dependent on the city water—*as water*. We've got some tanks and a couple of gas-engines, you know, out to the house. Besides, she's been awfully

busy lately, tracing the influence of Marcus Aurelius on Artemus Ward, or something, and the club doesn't meet summers, you remember—not for business."

Harry grinned, as if with satisfaction at having successfully defended his mother.

"Do you think the paper need discuss the water question?" queried Hallie, unable to stifle the query.

"Well," said Endicott Wiles' son lightly, "what good is a weather-vane, if it don't steer the wind? Some people are already asking if the paper's going to start a campaign against the company this year. Water's a sort of important thing in most people's careers, you see. Some parts of this town don't get *any* water in some hours of the hot days when everybody is using a lot elsewhere. That makes sore spots on the folks that live waterless. Some say that the fire supply is shy and that there's danger for a fact in that. Some fuss about the rates, though Dad seems to think they basely and grossly exaggerate. He built the waterworks, you know, with his very own money right out of his own

little bank account, and he's got a thirty-year franchise that compels him to pump just so many gallons a day, whether the town uses it or not. Think of that onerous obligation, will you? He's got to pump for twenty odd years more, poor Dad; and he only gets a mere fraction of a cent per gallon, and *no extras!*"

The three looked at each other and laughed again together. It was clear that Harry saw the water company from the outside.

But the boy got to his feet and ended the conversation for the time. When he went out to talk to Dick about the proper display type for Simon Bepper's advertisement, Marah shook her head a bit forebodingly at Hallie and turned to the reading of the long galleys of proofs before her without a word. And Hallie went out into and across the street to interview the postmaster about the recent weighing of the mails, with a queer apprehensive nervousness upon her that seemed like an unaccustomed diffidence before her immediate task. She was certainly not afraid to talk to kindly old Mr. Addison; but

she did not formulate a mental statement of what she did fear.

Three days had slipped away since the new editors had taken charge of *The Clarion.* They had been three days of intense application. There had been so much to do to prepare for the first edition which must be printed on this fourth afternoon. Monday, which had been filled with the sense of novelty in the first efforts to grasp the work, closing with the sudden intrusion of the first upcropping anxiety about the water question; Tuesday, crowded with compelling duties—a morning wedding at the Lutheran church to report, a tennis-match at the Winthrop Prases' in the afternoon, the Methodist ice-cream social in the evening, and discussion of the water question; Wednesday packed with events, Cora Warren's linen-shower, the preparations for the supervisors' picnic at Bay Port, the meeting of the beet-sugar men at the Welles House, the Olivers' silver wedding anniversary, the new endowment at the Forsythe Hospital, and conversation on the water question—they had been three days of tre-

mendous activity. Hallie had hardly had time to be tired. She felt that she had hardly had time to think. And yet, she had been thinking —thinking continuously—of the water question.

She had been giving her whole heart and mind to every piece of work that came to her to do. Every event seemed fraught with importance to so many people—a thing she had never quite realized before. Marah had written an "editorial bow," to head the column in the first edition, that had somehow pointed that fact for Hallie, in the way it spoke of printing the news, the whole news and nothing but the news. And the two girls had looked at each other over it and had decided that of all the subjects they must write about, not one occupied quite the place of the water question.

Harry was not the only one who had talked about it. There was real feeling in the town, which Marah, working in Brighton, and Hallie, still in high school, had last year failed fully to understand. It was going to be discussed; there was no doubt at all about that. There was going to be again what Dick had described as a

row. The thing the girls had to settle was to whom and to which side did *The Clarion* owe allegiance? And they had not found it a simple thing to decide.

Hallie had "killed" her little item about the park grass and the dusty streets, despite Dick's comments. They had felt that they need not precipitate the quarrel. Of course they repudiated the notion that *The Clarion* was to be "a throttled paper"; but they had decided nothing. As Hallie listened to-day to Martin Addison's prosy statement about the weight of various mails, she was conscious that the fat old postmaster was a member of the council who had passed the water ordinances. As she went later to get Mrs. John Wallace's list of notices for the Presbyterian services, she saw that Mrs. Wallace's lawn showed early signs of drought, and was reminded of city water. As she passed the Welles House café, she saw the Varonna Springs wagon full of huge crystal bottles at the door, and thought again of city water. As she stopped to see Millie Corliss, at the Diamond Ice Company's office, just to ask a question about the

ice supply, she saw a driver in the yard outside using a hose to wash out his wagon—with city water. Before the fire-engine house at the corner below she passed a strip of pavement nearly covered with brown, flattened, web fire-hose, draining off city water. At the corner she dodged a sprinkler that was raising dust with an obviously too slight spray of city water. She walked out swiftly through six long blocks to Mrs. Carey Hargreave's beautiful house, for the luncheon "story," as Marah so knowingly called it. And she found herself looking at Mrs. Carey Hargreave's aristocratic, though just now friendly face, as she took notes about pink decorations and strawberry parfait, with the names of twelve guests, while she remembered that this smiling and gracious lady was Endicott Wiles' daughter, Harry's sister, and therefore a person specially interested in—city water.

Of course it was important, that water question. What question could be more so? Everybody used water—must use water. Everybody must be supplied. There could be no hardship like being cut off from the supply. There could

hardly be anything that people needed, the curtailment of which would be so bitterly resented.

Hallie wrote her final news for the paper while the little cylinder-press rolled and bumped and clacked, under Carey Trottle's hands, printing the first side of their first *Clarion*. Afterwards she stood watching Dick Sanderson, with Rene Stiver helping him, make up the form of the final pages of the paper, with the mass of her own contributions in the dusky brass-ruled columns. Finally she took from Dick's hands the first smudgy completed sheet and turned with it to Marah, with thrills running all over her at sight of her own phrases, her own sentences, her own headlines, looking out of it at her everywhere. And the whole time she knew that in it all, there was not a line that compared for importance with the coming discussion of city water.

It was a queer sensation to read all her own records of her own town's events in the printed paper that night. It was queer to see neighbors sitting on their doorsteps after supper, reading

them also. It was novel indeed, next day, to be stopped in the street by people as old as her mother, and complimented on the array of news and the method of its handling. Also it was delightful. But these novelties and the delights were slight, compared with the excitement that leaped up like flame in her heart, when she came into the office at noon on Friday and found Endicott Wiles himself there with Marah and Harry, making his first visit, and—yes, already discussing the water question.

He was a tall, wide-shouldered, black-eyed man, Endicott Wiles, with close cropped black hair and mustache. He had the solid, prosperous look of the man accustomed to the control of large sums of money. He was considered a handsome man. He could certainly be gracious —as could his aristocratic daughter. And he was assuredly gracious over the matter in hand.

"It's grown to be amusing to me," he was saying, when Hallie came in; and he turned to her with a smile and an extended hand that expressed congratulation and compliment in plenty without breaking the thread of his remark.

"The town thwarts every move I make toward improvement, loads me with obstacles, and then complains of the service—howls about it. Why, I wanted to lay mains up to the west end and had actually ordered the pipe, when the council decided I'd have to pay for all street damage where I had to tear up pavement." He laughed easily, his fine black eyes sparkling. "I offered to enlarge the reservoir last year, if the town would pay half the cost of a dam across the end of Shippen Hollow and extend the franchise twenty years to make my investment safe. And the town hooted. I added a pumping engine three years ago for special fire service, and am pumping twenty per cent. more water now than the original contract calls for. There's been no increase in rates. Restrictions on lawn sprinkling? Of course. Show me the town or city that doesn't have them."

"Dad," interjected Harry, "there's been an increase in rate-paying population."

"Exactly so, young man, and I've had to supply it at the old rate. If you'd made good use of your schooling you might know enough

physics to be aware of what my problem is. The pumping of water is not nearly so simple a matter as it sounds. I increase my volume pumped by twenty per cent., only at cost of a far greater percentage of increase in power. Do you understand that? For every gallon I lift into the pipes, over and above the original estimate, I add to the cost of lifting every other gallon I pump. Hence, for every additional family I supply with water at the old rate, I add to the cost of supplying all families."

Harry was grinning slightly, but his father had ceased to notice him. "Losing money, are you, Dad?" asked the boy, mischievously.

"I'm losing money that ought to be made out of the capital invested, yes," said Mr. Wiles seriously. "Everything costs more now than when my franchise was granted. Coal costs more, labor costs more, all supplies cost more, pipe, oil, packing, tools, the scores of little things that swell expense. Constant repairs, wear and tear, improvements, all require a constant flow of money into, rather than out of, the plant. Why, take the pavement damage regulation alone—

but why discuss details? I'll gladly show any reasonable citizen or committee of citizens my books at any time. I want the town to have good service. It gets good service now—better than it pays for. And it wants to get more and pay less. I wish I could sell out to Pentwater tomorrow at a price that would clear me."

Harry got up from his chair and walked unceremoniously out of the office. Presently his voice could be heard in conversation with Carey Trottle over certain advertisements to be left standing in type. Mr. Wiles picked up the paper from Marah's desk and looked smilingly at it.

"I've been telling Miss Whittlesey how proud I am of this, Miss Rector," he said. "And the town is proud of it. I knew you two young ladies could do it, and you've demonstrated. And, as to your editorial attitude on the water question, which will be discussed, of course, I have no notion of your consulting my interests at all. A newspaper must print the truth, if it is to *be* a newspaper. I only ask you to be sure it is the

truth, the two-sided truth you print, on this or any other question."

"Will you give us a statement—an exposition of the water company's side of the case, Mr. Wiles?" asked Marah. "It's being discussed so much, and we haven't any data."

"Of course," said the banker, quickly. "I'll have a brief statement prepared on the facts, and the facts only, and you can print it if you choose, in answer to criticism. Of course, there's discussion. There will be as long as people continue to want something for nothing—which will be longer than you and I shall last."

He went away with a smile and a nod and another handshake for each, and when he was gone, Hallie, at least, felt better than she had for a week. Her chum nodded, albeit a little vaguely, over the statement that "that ended one difficulty," and the two plunged into a new week's work.

Harry had no more to say about city water for a time. Neither it seemed, had any one else, for the next few days. The subject appeared to Hallie to bury itself under the mass of other

subjects that arose for handling as abruptly as it had come up. Saturday and Monday brought fresh interests with fresh events. Excitement rose over a new job printing contract with the gas office that meant generous profits. The Turner Business College asked for figures on its new catalogue which had always been printed at Brighton, and which would run into hundreds of dollars. There was a sudden renewal of old talk about trying to change the county seat of Dodge county from Pentwater to Caxton, with consequent red hot interviews for *The Clarion.* There was a new crop of incidents every day that made Marah talk a little sometimes of a period when *The Clarion* might blossom out into a daily—at which suggestion busy Hallie stood aghast. There was a never failing flow of interests, fresh and absorbing every day; and all was meat for *The Clarion's* seething pot.

It was not till Wednesday that the promised statement came from Mr. Wiles. When it did, however, both Hallie and Marah read it and found it clear, concise and convincing. Mr. Wiles showed the things of which he had told

them, with dates and figures and details that seemed unanswerable. Both girls drew long sighs of relief over it. Both felt that a serious burden of responsibility was, at least, shifted. And Thursday, *The Clarion* printed the statement in full with an editorial comment to the effect that it was offered by the company at *The Clarion's* solicitation in answer to criticism.

And Friday morning the storm broke. If the people of Pentwater who had had occasion to feel deeply about the city water supply, had each been slapped in the face with his copy of *The Clarion* the night before, there could hardly have been so great an outcry of resentment. And expressions of the feeling came promptly and in no uncertain terms. It was before eight o'clock that Dr. Charles Barrister called up from his home on West End Hill, and asked sarcastically whether *The Clarion* was going to run regularly "that joke column on the second page." Hugh Oliver stopped his motor-car in front of the office on his way to the station for a morning trip to Brighton and asked tersely to have his paper stopped. He said he had no use for a

journal that could "feel the pulse of a town no better than that." Attorney Blaine Ferris telephoned early also, and asked in a melancholy drawl, if *The Clarion* held a brief for the water company. And he added that he had liked the paper under the new régime, as a newspaper very much, but that "this was too bad, this was; it was too bad."

Callers came in on various errands, some grinning with semi-mocking knowingness, others almost contemptuous, and occasionally one openly angry. Judge Winter said he was "sorry and ashamed" that his town paper should so make a laughing stock of itself for the county, over "this notorious question." Mrs. Harry Elliot brought in an item about the reading circle that had met at her home the evening before and told Hallie that no reading had been done because "everybody was so worked up over that defense of the water company!"

Of course the two girls denied that they had undertaken to defend the company. They pointed out that they had simply printed Mr. Wiles' statement, as a reply to criticism. Win-

throp Prase, who came in at noon about his advertising, listened to this and laughed.

"Who owns this paper," he asked, "the water company or only Endicott Wiles?"

"Neither," Marah answered, her face flaming at the implication.

"Do you own it?" asked Mr. Prase.

Marah hesitated for a brief answer in strict accord with truth.

"We're going to," cried Hallie, who was wincing in every fiber.

Mr. Prase went away laughing again; and that afternoon, Harry came in and informed them that the town had dubbed *The Clarion* "Nobody's Newspaper."

CHAPTER III

"A JOKE—IF NOT SO SERIOUS"

DURING the two or three days immediately following the appearance of *The Clarion's* second number, Hallie's feelings were not unlike those which afflicted the soul of Henny-Penny, when the pea fell on her head. She had a serious notion that the sky, the beautiful blue sky of her hopes, was falling; that her immediate world was in process of collapsing about her ears.

Endicott Wiles was away again and the girls had not his help or advice. To two sensitive young persons whose ambition was high and whose purpose was sincere and honest, the criticism and ridicule of a considerable number of their townspeople was punishment indeed. The name, "Nobody's Newspaper," became an epithet, a term of reproach, that stung and cut, as it was laughingly echoed by a number of town wags. Hallie, in fact, made herself nearly ill

over it, or what it implied, rather, lying awake through a considerable part of two nights to cry about it. Her mother, who understood thoroughly, tried to comfort her by telling her that she would see the proportions of the affair better after a week or so. But Hallie had not had enough experience of life to understand that yet. There was one evening, Sunday evening after church,—when she sank down by her mother's knees, as she had when she was a little girl, and buried her face in her mother's lap, with a sense that all the eyes of Pentwater people were looking at her with amused contempt, tinged with suspicion. And she wept till Mrs. Rector's face became very grave indeed over her.

Marah's father and brother seemed to take the matter less seriously than the girls did. Phil, indeed, only laughed. But Mr. Whittlesey advised impartiality, the printing of all the news and an avoidance of discussion of the sore subject as much as possible. He did not say much, for he seemed to wish his daughter and her friend to work out their own problem. And

Marah's report of his attitude depressed Hallie more than it helped.

But on Monday, things seemed suddenly to have altered, though no actual, tangible change had taken place. Somehow, Hallie found out that the sky was not falling. Pentwater people still took an interest in *The Clarion;* they still sent in news and "tips"; advertising patronage appeared to be rather on the increase, and job printing was coming in faster than it could be handled. Harry Wiles seemed to be finding a calling to his taste in soliciting business, and his very qualities of unafraid self-reliance and common-sense humor, coupled with strict truth telling, that grew offensive in some relations, seemed to be the exact equipment desirable when turned to this work. Harry told the truth about circulation and made no promises he could not fulfill on job work, and these two things alone made a strong appeal to the better business men in Pentwater.

Then there were the daily crops of fresh incident, some of it humorous, some of it sad, all of it charged with the very message of that "hu-

man interest," about which Marah had so much to say. Hallie could hardly dwell constantly on her own fears and forebodings when she had to write of little Jim Wendling, who had diphtheria so badly that his father couldn't even tell about it over the telephone; or of Nora Moriarty who scalded her feet cruelly with water from an overturned tub; or of young Alexander Chandler who was run over by a farm-roller on the river bridge and who ran away to go swimming two days later, with the surgeon's stitches still in his youthful scalp. She cried when Rev. Dudley R. Cameron resigned the chaplaincy of the Grand Army post and went away to the soldiers' home at Grand Rapids, to die, as he said. She laughed when Mrs. Harriet Stoner sent in six poems, on "the six summer months," all "original and written herself," of which the one for June will suffice as a sample:

> June, June, June! Thou com'st too soon;
> Thy face is like the harvest moon,
> Thy lips are pearled with heavenly dew.
> We kiss them, wish them, only you
> Can know we love them! But we croon
> For June, too soon, this ryme and rune.

The sweet singer of Pentwater, Harry christened Mrs. Harriet Stoner, and he went about for days, chanting half aloud "We kiss them, wish them—but we croon!" till the office force was hysterical.

But Hallie wrote a kindly note to Mrs. Stoner, that had no laughter in it, explaining that *The Clarion* couldn't print poetry because of lack of space for it, and felt a little guilty for even being amused.

But she found herself looking at the face of the world, with a new recognition that it is made up of a multitude of interests, no one of which can long be absolutely paramount.

Harry too, freely discussed his father, his statement for the water company and the attitude of the town, pro and con. He talked of "the old man and his graft," as if it were a generally understood thing that the Gas-Electric-Water Company was "a gilt-edged sinecure." And Marah and Hallie and Harry held consultations after which Hallie felt chastened but more hopeful, in the determination to be firmly impartial, and to take things as they came ac-

cording to Harry's advice "with a stiff upper lip."

The third number of *The Clarion* came out packed with local news, and with no reference to the water question; and the popularity of the paper seemed, oddly enough, to have rebounded above par. And when, Friday, Mrs. Endicott Wiles announced that she would entertain the ladies of the Woman's Club at her home on Tuesday next, and sent both Hallie and Marah formal invitations, Hallie's spirits seemed to receive a fillip that raised them quite into the sun once more.

Privately Hallie had social aspirations. Mrs. Endicott Wiles and her daughter Dorothea, who was Mrs. Bruce Hargreave, were the social leaders of the town, which boasted its own little four hundred. To be regularly invited to the home of either of these ladies was a social distinction. Hallie was hugely elated; Marah did not exclaim, but her chum saw the flush in her cheeks and the light in her eyes when they talked of the event, and understood that she cared, too.

When Hallie, in a new cornflower blue silk

gown purchased on the strength of new earnings, entered Mrs. Wiles' drawing-room that Tuesday afternoon, with her chum, in white, looking as sweet as an apple-blossom, she found herself suddenly the object of more and more flattering attention than she had ever before received in her life. Mrs. Wiles, handsome, dignified, distinguished, and young Mrs. Hargreave, elegant, gracious, welcomed them both with marked courtesy. The manner of their introduction to a stranger or two present was very friendly. The easy reference to the work the two were doing, in "making over" the town newspaper, rang with genuine compliment. Other ladies present made much of them both, and praise was plentiful.

"I read my own home paper with some real interest now," smiling little Mrs. Axford Hughes told Marah.

"Your handling of the news has the virtue of being fresh," said Mrs. Jermain to Hallie. "You don't write 'dainty refreshments were served,' or 'a good time was had by all,' as Mr. Hersey invariably did. You have something

real to say. You can't imagine what a relief it is!"

"It's a pleasure to meet two such interesting young ladies," said gray-haired Mrs. Alexander Pompton, of Brighton, who was Mrs. Wiles' guest for the week. "Everybody here seems to be very proud of what you are doing, my dears. It is something fine to have accomplished such a thing as you evidently have done—the transformation of a dying newspaper."

Dorothea Hargreave kept Hallie by her side during a long half hour, making the girl feel that the anecdotes she shyly found to tell of her new work, were fascinatingly interesting to the older woman herself and to the group she gathered to listen. Once more Hallie found eyes upon her everywhere—for the two girls, who were doing something, were the novelty of the occasion,—the eyes of Pentwater society, but smiling now, all friendly, approving eyes. And as Hallie was susceptible in social matters, it was an afternoon of intoxicating pleasure for her. And when Dorothea Hargreave told her and Marah that she planned to have them both

in her own home, on the occasion of a musical the following week, when a certain great pianist, of nation-wide fame, was to be her guest, the younger girl at least felt that the new work had accomplished one unlooked-for thing that overbalanced all the rest—had lifted them into a standing with what James Hersey had been wont to call "the élite" of the town, in a way that was like magic.

Hallie slipped out of the blue cornflower at home in the late afternoon, and hurried into her working clothes again, eager to hasten back to the office and write of the whole wonderful happy affair before the dark of another night. Mrs. Rector looked at her flushed, chattering, happy daughter as if she were finding it hard to believe that she was the same girl who had nearly cried herself ill two evenings before. And Hallie hurried away with the feeling that the whole shady street was alight with rose color that came from something quite other than a July sunset.

It was late and working-hours for the printers were over for the day, but when Hallie

reached the office, she found the door open and Dick, with a very sober look on his usually cheerful yellow-red face, still busily laboring over something. He looked up, when Hallie entered, and his gaze carried such a message of trouble that the girl went straight to the stone by which he stood and put a question.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing *new*," answered Dick, with heavy emphasis. "Mr. Carey Trottle has taken this P. M. to get drunk; that's all. And he's smashed the face of about half that new Chapin Old Style, we got last week—the new display type, you know. He tried to plane a job-form with a quoin-key, I guess."

Hallie only partially understood the glib printer's terms, but she could see the battered and broken letters Dick had lifted out of the lines before him and laid aside. It was new type, the first addition to their plant they had made, and it was ruined. She was quickly angry. Carey Trottle had been expected to break out into his old bad habit; they had been warned about him. But that he should damage

new type in such a way was specially irritating to Hallie, who had lost none of her love for "the tools of the craft," as she became more familiar with them.

The incident seemed trivial afterwards, but it curiously took the edge from her eagerness to write of the happy afternoon. She went into the editorial office and tried, but she could not write at all as she wished. She felt excited and upset in a way that she knew was out of proportion to the occurrence, but she could not that night get back into the mood to write the glowing, graceful phrases, that should make Mrs. Endicott Wiles and Dorothea Hargreave feel that she had done their entertainment justice. She did not know that it was the sudden rather violent contrast between the beauty and charm of her rather astonishing social experience and the sordid little printing-office incident that had so lowered the tone of her feelings.

She wrote her account of the afternoon's event next day, and Marah said that it was good; but the sight of the offending Trottle, morosely at work again, and the fact that Dick gave him her

account of Mrs. Wiles' reception to put into type, somehow angered her anew. However, she recovered her balance of good cheer abruptly when Dr. Barrister telephoned in at one o'clock that little Jimmy Wendling, whose diphtheria had been so threatening, was going to get well, after all. And she spent the afternoon clipping items of state news from two city papers for a new column for their first page and was happy again, with Dorothea Hargreave's coming musical in the back of her mind.

So sped the hours. "It's like the whole of life, isn't?" Marah said, "only we are seeing so much more of it now than at home. Every day we shall have more lights and shadows, than most people do. It ought to open our eyes to see everything more plainly, don't you think?" And Hallie felt a youthful glow of pride and satisfaction in the sense of the broadening view the work was to give her.

Press-day came around again with Thursday. It was with sober earnestness that Marah suggested that a carefully worded editorial in the day's paper might lay the ghost of the jibe

upon the paper's ownership. She proposed to state the impartiality of *The Clarion* in terms that should assert the independence of the editors and give the town to understand that they had minds of their own. After securing Hallie's hearty approval, she began to write the momentous paragraph.

Hallie received the galley proof of her account of the Wiles reception that morning and she was busy reading and correcting it, when a visitor, a tall, dark, fine-looking young man, a stranger to both girls, came into the office door and stood before them, hat in hand, in a pleasing attitude of deferential courtesy that won him favor at once.

"I know this is publication day and therefore unspeakably busy, ladies," he began, in a big, virile voice, straightening a tall form, stroking a brown Van Dyke beard and looking from one to the other of the young editors with large, brown, glowing eyes. "But I've got some news for you that's worth while, I think. My name is Oglesby—Oliver Oglesby, of H. R. Oglesby & Co., of Chicago."

He laid a card before Marah, and sat down in a chair to which she motioned, while both girls turned to listen to him.

"Our business is to own and operate all sorts of public utilities—perhaps you know all about us? We do the thing on a big scale. We operate the street cars at Brighton—did you know? —and the gas and electric lighting plants at Marlette. We have franchises for a new water-plant at Houston, and so forth. Now, we've had our eyes on Pentwater for some time, because we've heard about the dissatisfaction of people here with the company that has the gas-electric-water monopoly. It's so, isn't it? There's a lot of dissatisfaction?"

Hallie was not sure exactly what she was feeling, as Mr. Oliver Oglesby's pleasant words boomed out in his big voice. When he stopped with his double query, however, and looked from Marah to her and back again, she knew from his manner of sudden hesitation that they were both showing concern in their faces.

"Why," began Mr. Oglesby again, "I'm not—I'm not—what's the matter?"

Marah laughed suddenly, nervously. "There's so much criticism of the water company here, Mr. Oglesby," she said, "that it's a tender subject with us."

The visitor looked mystified. Then he brushed hesitation aside. "Well, I've been talking to one or two of the citizens here—Simon Bepper, and Winthrop Prase and Geoffry R. Grawn—and our representative was here last January and saw a lot of people. We think we shall make a bid for franchises here. We can give better service than you are getting—a lot better—and give you lower rates—a lot lower. That's news to print, isn't it?"

He laid his hat on the desk and took a bundle of papers from an inner pocket. "These are the rates prevailing here now," he said, and read rapidly from a card he held. His eyes took on an amused, commenting look as he ran through the figures. Then he turned over his card. "We can cut some of those figures down till they will make some Pentwater eyes open pretty wide," he continued, and he began again to read figures.

It was all so sudden and so swift that Hallie

could not follow him in any details. But she needed no one to point out to her that here was something that instantly promised to vitalize the already disturbing water question into a renewed "row" indeed. How ripe the people of Pentwater were for just such a proposal, she had reason to be keenly aware. She had never heard of the H. R. Oglesby Company, but the stamp of the powerful, capable, keen young man before her was not to be mistaken. His personality classed his company and his enterprise immediately in a high place of respectful consideration. And Hallie knew, without consciously analyzing the situation, what was the position into which *The Pentwater Clarion* and its editors were about to be plunged.

It came like the proverbial unexpected lightning flash. Five minutes earlier, she had been sitting with comparatively peaceful spirit, correcting Carey Trottle's rather "dirty" proof, in happy unsuspicion that the thing which had already caused Marah and herself such unpleasant hours was on its way to attack them again in new guise. Now, here was this fine-appearing

young man, his big, pleasant brown eyes alight with singularly quick apprehension of some sort of difficulty, talking easily of a subject that bristled like a hedge-hog, as it were, with threats for their handling.

"It's a joke," Mr. Oglesby was saying, "or it would be, if not so serious, how the people of Pentwater are being fleeced. The old company here has been fattening for years, positively wallowing in profits, while the town goes with half service. It's not only inconvenience and discomfort but positive menace of disaster, too—but, you know. All I want is to have the paper print a little stuff about the Oglesby Company's proposal. It won't need comment,—unless you want to give it a little editorial send-off."

He paused again, his gaze puzzled once more. "Why, I seem to have said something—er—shocking!" he laughed abruptly. "Have I? You're not—daughters of the water company, or anything like that, are you?"

Hallie was almost ready to cry out with exasperation at her sudden sense of a fresh di-

lemma. But Marah answered the caller with a quiet smile.

"We're not daughters—no," she said. "But we are in a most annoyingly awkward position. We have already had a lot of criticism, because we are under heavy obligation to Mr. Endicott Wiles, who *is* the old water company, and because we've been trying to offend nobody over this question that is, as you say, stirring the town."

"Obligation?" echoed Mr. Oglesby, going straight to the point of the speech.

"Yes," returned Marah. "He helped us get this paper—bought it for us in fact and we haven't paid for it yet."

"Oh," said the caller, looking suddenly uncomfortable. "Well, then—I see."

Hallie suddenly writhed at his tone. "Oh, don't say that!" she cried, "We are *not* throttled! We can print what we please, only—only——"

She stopped. The three looked at each other for a long, silent moment. Then they laughed together. Suddenly Hallie found herself rushing on into swift sentences of explanation, into

a hasty history of their situation for this stranger's benefit. And then, hardly realizing how strange it was, she discovered that he was answering her with a quick exposition of such truths about the water situation in Pentwater that she and Marah listened for a half hour absorbed. She could not have repeated what he said to them. She only knew that he had facts at his tongue's end that amazed her with his intimacy with local conditions. She only knew that he riddled the statement of the water company, given them by Endicott Wiles to print, and thoroughly familiar to this remarkable young man, till it seemed to have been a childish juggling of figures. She listened to stories of results secured by the Oglesby Company in other monopoly-ridden towns, and ended with a sick conviction that she had heard the truth, at last.

It was a long talk in the little editorial office, but Mr. Oliver Oglesby went away and left two very sober-faced, albeit highly excited, young ladies to consult over the copy of his company's announcement, while certain phrases he had used about a newspaper losing its caste as a pa-

per unless it printed *the news,* rang in their ears. They consulted through the whole of the noon hour, too, quite forgetting their lunch. But when the decision was reached, Dick Sanderson had some "rush copy" to set, and the sober faces took on looks of settled determination from which an observer might easily have gathered that the newspaper business is not all pink luncheons and funny poetry, even for girls.

Mr. Endicott Wiles was away, "as usual," Marah said. But the announcement of the proposals of the Oglesby Company was going into the paper. It was news and *The Clarion* was a newspaper. And the only concession its editors made to the clearly foreseen fact that Mr. Wiles was "not going to like it," was in the entire absence of editorial comment on the water question.

Hallie finished her proof of the account of the Wiles function, hastily, and the paper went to press at four o'clock, while Harry was busy reading and slapping his knee over a proof of the Oglesby matter. According to his judgment, it was just right. So, also, according to Dick's.

Next day the town of Pentwater buzzed again over city water. Also the telephone in *The Clarion's* office buzzed with favorable comments—even with some apologies from men who said they had spoken hastily in offense over the water company's statement, and who acknowledged that a newspaper must print both sides. There was a certain gleeful tone in some of the comments on the situation created by the Oglesby proposals, that made the young editors less than comfortable. But the general approval created a glow in the sanctum that was hard to dampen.

In suspense, pending Mr. Wiles' expected return home Saturday, Hallie nearly forgot about anticipated comments on her report of the reception. It was not till Saturday morning that she remembered, and then recollection was rudely stirred.

Harry came into the office with an oddly deprecatory look on his usually rather pert face and laid a long newspaper clipping on Hallie's blotter. The girl picked it up and saw it to be her account of the Wiles reception cut from the

newspaper page. She also saw that a sentence in the middle of the long column was heavily underscored with a pen, and below it across the type was written the single word—Disgusting!

Horrified, she read the underlined sentence at a glance.

"Old Mrs. Pompton, of Brighton, was the guest of honor."

Old Mrs. Pompton! Horrible! Impossible! Yet, there it was! *Old* Mrs. Pompton! She had never written it so. Where had that hideous adjective come from? Hallie cried out her questions aloud in her intense distress.

"Of *course,* you didn't write it so," said Harry, his face full of sympathy, while Marah took the clipping to read. "It was that drunken Carey Trottle that *set* it so. How he got it that way whether blindly or mischievously only the fate of the drunken type-setter knows. Or how you missed it in the proof!" Harry added.

Hallie had read the proof herself. She suddenly remembered with sickening heart that she had been less than half through the column when Mr. Oliver Oglesby had come in. Could she

have missed such an error—oh, such a pitiful error!—in the excitement?

"And your mother?" asked Marah of Harry.

Harry held up his hands. "She sees only poor Mrs. Pompton's face—Mrs. Pompton is sensitive, as it happens—and the laugh that will go over the county!"

Hallie groaned and sat down in her chair too weak to cry. But Harry went on.

"But mother is nothing to father," he said. "He got home last night and he's punching heel-holes in the rugs in his library. He says the Oglesbys are fakers and frauds and franchise-grabbers and political filibusters and everything else, except maybe thimble-riggers and horse-thieves. And he says you—er, *The Clarion*—has done him an unwarrantable and irreparable injury. Oh, yes, there's Don *Kee-ho-tee* to pay up to our house this morning!"

CHAPTER IV

WHAT IS THE NEWS?

CAREY TROTTLE stood at the alley door of *The Clarion* office, his dark, sullen face full of an angry light.

"Fired, am I?" he queried of Sanderson who leaned against the door-jamb and coolly surveyed him.

"You're that," returned Dick. "Any man that ain't got sense enough not to mix alcohol with his brains has got no business in a print-shop. Now, you vamoose, and don't hang around here."

"It ain't my fault that them girls didn't catch that in the proofs," growled Trottle.

"It's your fault it was in the type," answered the sandy-headed foreman. "I wouldn't take oath you didn't stick it up so, just for pure devilment, either. Queer things happen to compositors sometimes, but that—that was too queer. Cut stick now. We ain't going to have no blacksmiths in this shop hereafter."

Sanderson moved inside and closed the printing-office door. Trottle turned slowly away, his black brows meeting under the shadow of his slouch hat, and his thin lips muttering bitterly.

"I fired him," said Dick, at the door of the editorial room, a moment later. "I can get a man for his job to-morrow."

By the editorial desk Hallie and Marah were sitting in their usual chairs. In the visitors' chair next the doorway sat Mr. Endicott Wiles. It was the Monday morning following Harry's report of the sensation created in his home by the week's edition of *The Clarion*, and Mr. Wiles was making his first call at the office. Strangely enough, he seemed to be in mild mood now, patient, pleasant, forbearant, anything but the wrathful man Harry had pictured him.

"I understand quite well how it all happened," he was saying, as Dick interjected his report; and he continued when Sanderson had turned away. "You simply did not—you do not understand the bearing of the statements Oglesby made. They reflect seriously on the old water

company and on me, and there are people in this town who will gloat over such misrepresentations."

"But, Mr. Wiles, we couldn't refuse to print *the news* about the Oglesby offer," said Marah, her brows bent painfully above the bows of her glasses.

"News, my dear young lady, is your stock in trade. But you do not print rumor and canard without investigation. Pardon my saying so; but to print the Oglesby proposition as you did, amounted to almost equal editorial carelessness. You don't know the Oglesbys, do you?"

"No, sir," answered Marah, "but I know——"

"I understand what you would say. You know that some of the statements he made echo some of the plaints you have heard here in town, and which have been reiterated to you so many times that you are beginning to be impressed. Isn't it so?"

"Mr. Oglesby showed us so convincingly——" began Hallie.

"His side of the question," interrupted Mr. Wiles again. "Now, young ladies, let me put

you a question. Is it fair to me, under the circumstances, our relations in this newspaper matter having been what they are, to print things about this water question without submitting them to me? I know you will say I was away and that people would think it strange if you had nothing to say about the Oglesbys. But you cannot escape *some* criticism, and it seems to me that you should——"

"Oh, Mr. Wiles! *The Clarion's* already been called 'Nobody's Newspaper,' because we hesitated to assert our independence of control!" cried Marah. "You said we should not be hampered; that you wanted us to run the paper according to our own best judgment!"

"Exactly. But you must know your ground. The Oglesbys are clever schemers who are capable of trickery, I assure you, to gain their ends. They have no serious intention of establishing a plant at Pentwater. That's nonsense. Why, they couldn't; I've got the franchises, with twenty years and more, yet to run! They have some other ax to grind; I don't pretend to know what it is. But they're always after publicity and Mr.

Oliver Oglesby simply put one over on you, Thursday—if you'll excuse bald slang, that expresses it."

Marah looked past the side of her glasses across at her chum. Hallie felt that it was hard to argue with this smooth-tongued man of affairs, whose self-confidence, knowledge of the world and habit of command combined to silence them and to put them at fault. Her conviction that there was truth in the complaints about the water company, and that there had been good reason for printing the news about the Oglesbys' announced plans shook before Mr. Wiles' keen glance and positive statements. She saw herself and her chum as helpless amateurs in the world of business, where truth was hard to define and a direct honest course difficult indeed to steer, because it was so hard to know just where to look for honesty and sincerity and square dealing. She felt keenly, in the presence of Mr. Wiles, that she and Marah had broken their just allegiance. She was very keenly aware of the things he had done for them, and she turned sick with the wavering of her mind toward the idea

that they had gone out of their way to discredit him with the townspeople. It was a miserable situation. She was miserable, wretched, with the after effect of the luckless blunder in the report of Mrs. Wiles' reception, and that matter helped to color this. They had decided to discharge Carey Trottle for his offenses, but it looked almost as if the editors of *The Clarion* had conspired last week to heap injury and insult upon their kindest patrons.

"Oh, Mr. Wiles," she said helplessly, "we want to be loyal to you! We want to print just what we ought to. We're simply between fires, and we may—make mistakes. Oh, that dreadful error in the account of Mrs. Wiles' reception! I shall never get over it."

She had not meant to drag this subject up again. Saturday afternoon she had called on Mrs. Wiles and explained to that decidedly cool and much aggrieved woman, just how the ludicrous but painful error had occurred, and the incident was past and gone. But Mrs. Wiles had not treated it as a thing that would be readily forgotten and in Hallie's wincing con-

sciousness, the thing was almost as great a matter as the water question at this moment.

But Mr. Wiles suddenly laughed. "Oh, that!" he answered. Then he laughed again.

"Mrs. Pompton herself was highly amused," he said. "Yes, it was awkward for you, but don't give it a further thought." His eyes, merry now, looked consideringly from one to the other of the young editors. "In fact," he added abruptly, "don't let this other matter bother you, either. Let's forget it, and go on as if it hadn't happened. Only don't print any more Oglesby stuff. You probably won't be asked to, for he's got what he wants now."

"Was he really just—using us. for publicity?" asked Marah.

Mr. Wiles was taking a sheet of paper from his inner pocket and looking at it. He shrugged his shoulders. "Miss Whittlesey," he replied, "Oliver Oglesby is the smoothest press agent in this part of America!" He held out the sheet of paper to Marah. "Here's my answer to his exploitation of his company's wares. You won't refuse to print that, will you?" he laughed.

"And then drop the subject. What good does discussion do, as long as a certain clique in this town is determined to block all progress? Let's forget!"

He was on his feet again and shaking hands with friendliness and satisfaction fairly shining in his face, at the end. He said he was going to New York for at least a week's stay, and that he hoped no new complication would arise in his absence. He *believed* none would arise. Then presently he was gone, and the two girls were bending over the copy of his defense of his company, each with the feeling, as Marah expressed it, that they had been "spanked and smiled upon, and set again in the way of well-doing."

Mr. Wiles' communication was in form of a signed letter. It read like a dignified, broad-minded, generous offer "to meet all sincere criticism with proper showing of fact," but it refused to consider any "unfounded and palpably untruthful slanders from mountebank franchise-jugglers, no matter how often reiterated."

Hallie noted the echo in the final phrase of

what he had said in the office, but she felt that the epithets used would be fully justified if the Oglesbys had merely been using *The Clarion's* column for press agent purposes.

"We're pretty well prohibited from saying anything more just now about the Oglesbys," remarked Marah. "That was a mandate, pure and simple—that last."

Hallie felt that it was true. But she was more than half convinced that Mr. Oliver Oglesby had "got what he wanted," and would not come back. She said so.

"Perhaps," answered Marah; "but we'll be in a bad fix, if he does."

"Why can't we be a sort of bulletin-board and print everybody's statement?" asked Hallie.

"We could, to some extent, if Mr. Wiles would consent. But we'd be Nobody's Newspaper for sure if we came to no opinion of our own."

"Have you one, now?" queried Hallie.

"I'm going to get one," returned Marah, briefly.

A new printer, named Claude Ellis, was found by Dick next day to take Carey Trottle's place,

and affairs began again to move on an even keel with *The Clarion.* Harry reported that Oliver Oglesby had left town, and the girls felt not a little foolish, as they looked upon this as a confirmation of Mr. Wiles' declaration regarding that gentleman's sincerity. Harry himself only laughed over the whole matter now, and refused to commit himself. He reported also that Carey Trottle, the discharged printer, was loafing about the saloons of the town, drinking and making no effort to get a new position, but indulging in dark prophesies regarding *The Clarion's* future, which almost amounted to threats.

But in the rush of other interests, Carey and his misdoings were almost forgotten. The picnic of the county supervisors at Bay Port, on the lake, was the event of the early week. Harry attended it and reported it. Then came Cora Warren's wedding, to which Marah was invited, and of which she wrote a graceful account for *The Clarion.* Then the Christian Endeavor committee on charities started a purse for poor Nora Moriarty, with her scalded feet, and that needed publicity. And, sandwiched in with the

larger affairs, were the constant comings and goings and entertainings and plannings of which even a little community of five thousand people perennially furnishes quantities for its newspaper.

It was Wednesday before Hallie suddenly remembered that she had not yet heard another word of Mrs. Dorothea Hargreave's musical. But, having remembered, she did not fail to wonder why no invitations had been issued. She hesitated to telephone to Mrs. Hargreave about it, treating it as a mere matter of news as she would ordinarily have done, for the very reason that she and Marah had been led to expect invitations and had not received them. She spoke to Marah of it and her chum laughingly suggested that they were cut off from "high society" because of the dark doings of Carey Trottle. Hallie laughed at this, of course, but she could not disabuse her mind of the notion that it might have more truth than humor in it. Still, so far as she could learn, the musical had not yet taken place without them.

Much to Dick's solemn disapproval, they pre-

pared Endicott Wiles' answer to the Oglesbys for printing and put it into the forms. "That'll stir up a hornet's nest," the foreman assured them, with privileged tongue of the shop censor. But they did not argue the point, and Thursday night *The Clarion* was out once more with its latest word on the ever-sore water question.

But comment was singularly lacking next morning. There was no buzzing of hornets—or telephones—whatever. It seemed almost, Hallie thought wonderingly, as if everybody had missed the Wiles' letter, or as if everybody was sick and tired of the whole matter. And all Friday passed with only a few comments of an indifferent nature from the townspeople.

Saturday morning, however, the first visitor at the office was Mr. Oliver Oglesby himself, who had returned to town the evening before, he announced, and he brought copy of a scathing reply to Endicott Wiles, which he confidently offered for printing. Metaphorically speaking, Mr. Oglesby's answer was intended to sear the epidermis of the old water company. Among the things it said in trenchant phrase was that if

the town of Pentwater did not burn up in the July and August sun, it stood a fair chance of burning up with fire some unlucky day, if the water system was not improved. It gave a list of names of the citizens of the town who were actually suffering, it charged, for lack of water in their homes. It repudiated insinuations that the Oglesbys were insincere in their purpose, and refuted charges of franchise grabbing. It directly offered to take over all the utilities of the town and save the citizens twelve per cent. of the rates they were paying for gas, electricity and water. It met the veiled implications of devious methods with open challenge and threatened suit for libel for repetition of suggestive remarks of such bearing.

Marah and Hallie read the pages with sinking hearts. They listened to Mr. Oglesby's cheerful assertions sadly. The fact that he had returned to the charge, that he dared say the things he did, that he seemed to be so perfectly sincere and completely in earnest, swept away much of the effect of what Endicott Wiles had said about him and his company. Both girls felt

that, in justice, he ought to be given the space he wanted to make his reply to Mr. Wiles. But Marah told him frankly that they would have to submit his contribution to their patron before they could print it now.

Oglesby laughed at this—not offensively, but with decided amusement. "Nuff said," he remarked, suddenly dropping his arguments. "I'll submit nothing for Endicott Wiles' approval. If you're bound, you're bound, and you can't help it; but I don't envy you your position."

It was hard to let him go away with that, and Marah asked for a copy of his statement, that they might consider it. He laughed again at that. Then he suddenly promised that he would see that they had a copy of the document Monday morning. And he left them.

If Mr. Wiles had been in town at this juncture, matters might have shaped themselves differently; but the youthful editors could see no way but the way they had chosen, till he should return.

Monday morning's first mail did, indeed,

bring a copy of Oliver Oglesby's statement. But before either Hallie or Marah saw it on their desk, they saw duplicates and triplicates and unnumbered replicas of it elsewhere. In fact when Hallie walked out of the shady avenue on which her home was, on that hot, dry July morning and started down the main street for the office, one of the first things she saw was a huge red and black poster, freshly posted on a bill-board, headed:

What "The Clarion"
Wouldn't Print.

Under this flaring attention-pinning double headline, was Oliver Oglesby's statement on the water question, with a paragraph accompanying it, rehearsing exactly what the editors of the Pentwater paper had said about printing it. On a bill-board across the street was another similar poster. Down the block, Hallie passed two more. On the corner nearest her office was another, and three loomed in a row on the side of an old building next door. Worst of all, directly in front of *The Clarion's* very entrance,

three barrels stood on the curb, filled with sand to make them stable, and each bore two of the posters; while the sidewalk itself was plastered with half a dozen more.

Unreasoningly shamed and startled, Hallie fled into the office, to hear from Dick, who was already there, that the posters had been printed by Andrew Maxson, the only other printer of consequence in town, and that they had been put up that very morning at daylight, with zeal for which some of the town mischief-makers rather than Oliver Oglesby were responsible.

Dick, himself, feeling no sympathy at all and avowing none for Endicott Wiles, was still staunchly loyal to his employers, and he was angry at the way the Ogelsby poster had been flaunted in their faces, as it were. When Marah arrived at the office, quite as much disturbed as Hallie had been, Dick and his new printer, Claude Ellis, were busy with water-pail and broom scrubbing the offensive sheets off the boards before the door, and rolling away the barrels. Of course, a small crowd of spectators, mostly boys, gathered to hoot and jeer, for the

town was already laughing. And out of this suddenly grew a distressing incident.

Dick was paying no attention to the little crowd about him and was just concluding his unpleasant task, when a tall, dark man shouldered his way through the gathered boys, and approached *The Clarion's* foreman. Hallie in the office window, saw at once that he was Carey Trottle, and his slouching gait betrayed immediately the fact that he was intoxicated. She saw him address Dick roughly and gesture at Claude Ellis and then at himself. She could hear no words, but it was perfectly clear that Trottle was asking for or about his lost job, and that he was in an ugly mood.

Hallie called to Marah and the two went quickly to the street door of the office. They were in time to hear a wild tirade of abuse break from Carey Trottle's lips, and to listen to threats and epithets and insulting implications heaped upon the little foreman's sandy head.

Dick listened also a moment or two, then turned towards the office door, directing Ellis inside ahead of him. He told Trottle "to go

away and mind his own business," but the man pursued him, as if he felt that Dick was retiring because afraid. One or two of the rougher members of the crowd shouted encouragement to the drunken man. And, next moment Hallie saw him half turn, clench his fist, and, without warning, strike Dick a staggering blow on the unguarded cheek.

Hallie screamed as Sanderson let his pail fall clattering to the walk. She started to run out, hardly knowing what she intended. But she need not have feared for the little foreman. He was the type of long armed, deep chested men who remind one of the orang-outang, and he was possessed of some of that animal's redoubtable prowess and spirit. He turned on his cowardly assailant with a silent swiftness that utterly surprised the other, caught Trottle's extended wrist, twisted him close and, lifting him fairly off the walk, flung him with a crash almost to the gutter. As it happened the man struck the edge of the long sidewalk boards, which were wet with the recent scrubbing, and he slid off, actually

into the street, with a heavy fall that must have jarred every fiber in him.

An instant after, Dick with the sympathy of the fickle, cheering crowd with him now, was back in the office and had shut the door. And Hallie saw Trottle pick himself up sorely and limp away shaking his fist alike at his victorious opponent and at the spectators who were now laughing at his down-fall.

It had not been a pretty incident, but Hallie felt some satisfaction in the outcome of it, after Trottle's cowardly first blow. She turned to see what Marah would say, and found that her chum was at the telephone, which Hallie now became conscious had been ringing unattended for some moments. She sank down in her chair, as Marah finished an unintelligible conversation with some one who evidently had more to say to, than to learn from, *The Clarion* office.

As Marah hung up the receiver she looked up with an expression of weariness suddenly upon her face. But before she spoke, Harry Wiles came rushing in from the street.

"Say," he shouted, "you've seen the posters, of

course! And what do you think—Winthrop Prase met me just now and ordered me to discontinue his advertising. He says he won't support a paper that is hobbled and pegged out by the water company!"

"Oh, dear!" cried Hallie, her heart sinking like lead. "And you just got him to use a half-page regularly!"

Both she and Harry looked at Marah. The older girl was sitting with her hands spread on the desk before her, as if for moral if not for physical support. She looked from one to the other with wide, grave eyes.

"So Winthrop Prase has stopped his advertising, has he?" she asked, slowly. "Well, so has Simon Bepper—over the 'phone, just now. And he—has been using a page a week!"

CHAPTER V

AN IMPOSSIBLE FIX

"THIS is like a council of war!" murmured Hallie. "But I don't feel like war. Oh, I feel as if I wanted to run away and hide and stop up my ears and forget for good and all that Pentwater ever had a water question!"

The room was quite full of people; that is, all the available easy-chairs were taken and some that were uneasy, as Marah expressed it. It was what the Whittleseys called their come-and-go room, and in it were gathered that Tuesday evening Marah and Hallie, Mrs. Rector, Harry Wiles, and Marah's father and mother and brother Phil. It was a consultation, indeed, whether for war or peace must depend upon its outcome.

"You can't run away," said Phil Whittlesey, a big, solid, athletic fellow who had run away from few things in the course of his life.

"The water question is a red-hot issue in this

town to-night, father, paradoxical as that may sound," said Marah, "and Hallie and I are caught between the factions. We've split the town; some are for us and our little paper, but, oh, there's a multitude against us since that poster came out yesterday morning!"

"It is rather a difficult situation for two girls," responded Mr. Whittlesey. He was a kindly, competent, but rather quiet man, who usually talked little. He was very fond and proud of his children, but he was very much given to the theory and practice of letting them fight their own battles so far as might be without interference from him. He had maintained his habitual attitude in the problems that Marah had found in her newspaper work, loath to offer advice, only letting her feel that he liked the spirit with which she met her work and that his sympathy was with her and his confidence staunch in her.

"I have to confess, I am almost ready to back out," said Hallie, unhappily. "It's cowardly, I know; but we didn't look for any such complication as this."

"I think it's mean of Dad to put you in such a position," volunteered Harry, feeling perhaps that his presence in the council prevented free expression of opinion on one phase of the subject. "I don't say that he foresaw what was coming; but he sees now, of course. It's an impossible fix."

"It *is* impossible!" exclaimed Marah. "We owe everything we have, except Aunt Jennie's single thousand dollars, to your father. Also his bank and his companies give us a very nice share of our job-printing business. We have every reason for gratitude and we are not ungrateful. But I don't believe we're going to be able to back him in this water fight. The town's against us, and I'm beginning to be entirely convinced that the facts are, too. Moreover, it's going to be financial ruin, if any considerable number of our advertisers follow the examples of Mr. Prase and Mr. Bepper, and take away their business."

"On the other hand," put in Hallie, "if Mr. Wiles wants to withdraw his support of us, where are we then? He holds our note with a

mortgage on the office and outfit. He could close us out."

"Not till the note is due," said Phil, quickly.

"Well," said Marah, "it's not a question of time; it's a question of obligation. Do we owe allegiance to Mr. Wiles? Forgive me if I say it plainly, Harry. This has got to be a talk about bare facts."

"Sure!" exclaimed Harry. "I don't stand up for the old man. He's dead wrong, I think."

"But he's your father, Harry," said Mrs. Whittlesey, softly.

"Yes," said Harry. "Beg pardon. But he *is* in wrong on this water business. He wants all the money and will give as little as he can in return, and I know as well as anybody else that it's wrong. Why, that stuff of Oglesby's is straight goods, and Dad knows it. If it ever comes to a show-down, he'll have to squirm, too, I'll wager."

"There are too many good, sensible, level-headed people who demand better service, for us to doubt about the truth any more," mourned Hallie. "I interviewed every merchant on

Main Street to-day, and I got six representative interviews in the avenues. And they all say the same thing. But how can we turn on Mr. Wiles, after all he's done for us? If we can't be neutral, then I want to quit—that's all."

"That's slang," said Phil, teasingly. He took the matter in thoroughly cheerful humor.

"I'm far past caring for my language or my appearance—almost for my meals," groaned Hallie, half smiling, but not at all cheered.

"Yes; you're a mere shell of your former self," remarked Phil, sympathetically.

"Oh, but," cried Marah, "Hallie doesn't mean a word of the quitting business. She's as anxious to fight it out as I am. And we're going to fight it out, too. But we don't want to go on making mistakes."

"I don't think you've made any serious mistakes, so far," said Mrs. Rector, gently, smiling across at the two girls, who sat together, Marah in a big chair and Hallie on its arm.

"I agree with you, Mrs. Rector," said Mr. Whittlesey.

"But we've got to take one side or the other

now, don't you see?" cried Hallie. "Even our printers are with the antis, as Marah calls them. And here we are with our hands tied by obligations on one side and our convictions leaning to the other. If we follow our convictions we'll——"

"Lose our hands!" interrupted Harry. "But we're not going to prosper much, if we lose more ads either. Simon Bepper and Winthrop Prase say *The Clarion* is hostile to the town's best interests. They don't soften their statements about wicked father for the benefit of innocent little son, either, I can tell you."

"'Cannon to right of them, cannon to left of them!'" said Phil, heavily.

"Such a helpful remark, brother!" said Marah. "Can't you, out of your ripe experience, suggest a way out for us."

"When in a dilemma, choose the other horn," returned Phil, with mock sententiousness. "But don't give up the ship."

"I wish you had the helm to manage at this exact moment," said his sister. "No, I don't

either," she added quickly. "I'm not so mean spirited."

"I'd put on full sail and nail the ensign to the mast," asserted Phil, in obscure metaphor.

"You'd put on a full grin and nail a cap and bells to the mast," retorted Marah, not so obscurely.

"That's only my graceful way of saying 'grin and stick it out,' sis," said Phil.

"We can grin, and we can stick," said Hallie, "but we can lose Miss Lawrence's thousand dollars in the meantime—and take all the rest of our lives paying it back—by school-teaching!"

"When is your father coming home, Harry?" asked Mr. Whittlesey.

"I don't know, sir. He doesn't confide in me much, you see," answered the boy.

"And we've got to print another paper day after to-morrow," said Marah. "What shall we do with this poster-incident?"

"I think," said Mr. Whittlesey, slowly, "that you can only be true to yourselves and your own convictions, always. Your hands can't really be bound by anybody or anything so as

to prevent that. If they are, there's nothing for it but to step down and out. If you've compromised your right to be honest, and your right to opinions of your own, you can't go on with honor or with self-respect—which are two things worth rather more than a thousand dollars apiece to each of you. But nobody but yourselves can decide what is honorable and right for you to do. You're not children any more. Stand on your own feet, whatever you do."

"Cast adrift!" lamented Marah, getting up and crossing to sit on the arm of her father's chair and rumple his hair affectionately. "This is like you, father!" she laughed gently.

Hallie wondered if her chum were really lighter hearted. No ray appeared in the gloomy sky for her, because of Mr. Whittlesey's advice. When, after a half hour's further talk, which, somehow, got away from the subject of supreme interest, she walked home with her mother, she felt weighed down to the depths of despondency with the prospect. Mrs. Rector felt that Mr. Whittlesey's words cut the

Gordian knot for *The Clarion's* editors. Hallie could not feel it. Right and wise? Well, maybe they were—but they spelled ruin for the whole enterprise, and failure and disgrace and debt, to Hallie's fears.

Harry was first at the office next morning. When Hallie arrived, he was sorting the mail, and a miscellaneous collection of slips of paper he had taken from the box on the front office-door, which was provided to receive volunteer contributions. The moment he heard Hallie's step, he called to her.

"Here's a new and beautiful departure in hostility," he announced.

Hallie's heart missed a beat. She seemed to be chronically apprehensive, these last few days, but no better prepared to meet new shocks. "What is it?" she asked, faintly, looking over Harry's shoulder at the papers he held.

"Well," answered the boy, "in a way this is clever. Listen: 'Henry Rose has resigned his position as foreman at the barn of the Heller Livery Company, to go into the milk business.' Sounds harmless, doesn't it?"

"Yes; isn't it?"

"Henry Rose is not foreman of Heller's barn, as it happens. He's a rather noisy young man who loafs about the Welles House and who is supposed to be much attracted by a young lady named Nellie Hough, who works for Varrick, the milk dealer."

"Oh," said Hallie; "then it's malicious."

"Yes. Here's another: 'Dr. Malcolm Stuart entertained a number of friends at luncheon at the Barnes café, Tuesday.' Wouldn't that be easy to print without investigation?"

"We ought to find out who the friends were and what the occasion was," said Hallie.

Harry laughed. "Dr. Malcolm Stuart entertains friends at the Barnes café every noon," he replied. "Dr. Malcolm Stuart is Hugh Barnes' little fox-terrier, named for an old friend of the family, and his guests are two cats, for whom he has a highly touching affection, extending to the sharing of his food."

Hallie's eyes were wide. "Why, who has written such things?"

"Somebody who wants to make a monkey of

the paper," returned Harry. "Look; here are five items, all in the same handwriting. The others read straight enough, but they are probably all fakes."

"How mean!" commented Hallie.

"It's worse than mean," said Harry. "It's dangerous. We might print something sent to us this way that would do real damage. Lucky I happened to notice those two."

"Lucky, indeed!" sighed Hallie. "Then we've got to investigate everything sent in to us, haven't we?"

"I guess we ought to, unless we know where it comes from."

Hallie was a good deal disturbed. It would be easy for a malicious person to cause much trouble by securing the printing of items purporting to be harmless personals but containing covert, uncomplimentary or even libelous meanings readily understandable by people acquainted with the persons concerned. The appearance of these contributions meant either that some person was endeavoring to indulge a misguided wit, or that the paper had an active

enemy. When Marah came in, however, she cheered her chum somewhat by telling her that most newspapers sooner or later suffer more or less from the Smart Alec who endeavors to tease a friend or insult an enemy anonymously through its printed columns.

Late that same afternoon, a telephone "tip" was received by Marah herself, which came from a professed friend of the paper, announcing that Miss Maizie Delarue, the little French milliner of South Main Street, had suffered a very serious accident that would be likely to disfigure her for life. The informant could give no details, and Marah therefore went at once to learn of the little milliner's misfortune. She returned at the end of half an hour, her face aflame with recurrent blushes, and related that her courteous and sympathetic inquiries at Miss Maizie Delarue's door had been met with a fury by an outraged little lady in a boudoir cap, who, she finally discovered, was a prisoner in her own house because a tricky breeze had that morning tumbled from her bedroom window and into the river, all the little lady's won-

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derful French curls and puffs—in fact the complete coiffure in which she usually appeared in public—and had swept them away forever.

Miss Maizie had thoroughly resented what she looked upon, not unnaturally, as an effort to make public her humiliation, and, having a sharp tongue, she had made Marah exceedingly uncomfortable, despite all effort at explanation.

This was of a kind with the false items of the morning, and *The Clarion's* editors became quickly wary. Hallie began to wonder, indeed, if a conspiracy had been formed against them, and, in her already unhappy frame of mind, these incidents depressed her still more. Marah, too, for the first time, showed some evidence that her happiness was dampened and her confidence in the ultimate outcome of their enterprise somewhat shaken.

Another council was held in the little office just at the end of the day, with only Hallie, Marah and Harry present, and there was no joking whatever in the conversation. The result was that next morning the three, in committee of the whole, as Hallie said, went

together to call upon Simon Bepper at his store.

Mr. Bepper received them in his private office, a cage of ornamental iron work and glass at the rear of his long store. He was a tall, gray, rather pallid, quiet and serious-faced man, who usually said little till he was ready to act. He wore a close-cropped mustache and short imperial, and was in the habit of sitting with his long form much bent, his shoulders bowed, one arm across his body with the wrist supporting his other elbow while his free hand stroked his short beard. His eyelids drooped heavily over his hazel-gray eyes, when he was listening consideringly to a business proposition, and they opened with sudden wide alertness when he was ready to speak.

Hallie held Mr. Bepper in great respect and in some awe, but it was clear that Harry, who held no one in awe, treated the elderly merchant much as he did all other older men—with no recognition of the fact that age gave them claim to special respect or consideration.

"Mr. Bepper," said the boy, "we've come to

talk out with you that matter of your advertising in *The Clarion*. Will you talk?"

Mr. Bepper set out chairs for his callers, smiled and sat down, bowed and attentive in his own. "I'll listen," he responded.

"I want you to," said Harry. "Miss Whittlesey and Miss Rector can tell you their position better than I can, and it's better to hear it from them, because of my father's relation to the matter—and my relation to him."

Mr. Bepper nodded and looked at Marah, stroking his beard.

"You have withdrawn your advertising, Mr. Bepper," began Marah, "because *The Clarion* seems to favor the old water company?"

The old merchant nodded again silently.

"Well, we do not intend to favor the old company, sir," stated the girl.

Mr. Bepper waited, without a sign, for more.

"We are under great obligations to Mr. Wiles," continued Marah, "for helping us to get hold of the paper; but we are not bound to defend his cause against the town."

Mr. Bepper still waited, his long, pale fingers

slowly moving over his hairy chin, his pale eyelids drooped with just a glint of his steady glance at Marah visible under them.

"We want to do just exactly right," persisted Marah, a little discouraged by her listener's silence. "We want to treat both sides with equal justice."

Mr. Bepper nodded, but did not speak.

"We want to be impartial, and to print the news only. We do not want to take sides."

Mr. Bepper's hazel-gray eyes opened suddenly. "You have no convictions, then?"

"Why," returned Marah, a bit surprised, "yes, sir, we have."

"What are they?" asked Mr. Bepper.

Marah hesitated. "Personally," she began slowly.

"Can you separate your personality from your business, young lady?" inquired the merchant, briefly.

Marah hesitated again. This was a new way of putting it. "I don't know that I understand," she answered.

"Can you believe one thing and print another?"

"We can remain neutral, sir."

Mr. Bepper smiled. "Can you? In my opinion there is no such thing as neutrality, in any case. But how can there be neutrality where a plain case of right and wrong is concerned?"

"Well—there can't be, of course," returned the girl, blushing. "But a newspaper's business is to print the news, to give all parties to a controversy an equal chance."

"Is it?"

"And we do not set ourselves up to judge between people in a controversy."

"If you hold a conviction what is it but a judgment?" asked Mr. Bepper drily.

Marah was confused. She blushed again. "Well, sir, we don't need to express our opinions."

"Don't we? My dear young lady, don't you realize that, as newspaper publishers, you and your friends have become public personages,

with influence? Have you no conscience regarding that influence?"

Both Marah and Hallie regarded the old man blankly. To Hallie the words were like additions of lead dropping upon her heart, each a fresh weight to help sink it lower and lower.

"Isn't that taking higher ground than is necessary in this case, sir?" asked Marah, at last. "This is not a great moral question."

"Why not?" asked the merchant tersely.

Again Marah was silenced thinking.

"But, Mr. Bepper," suggested Hallie, wishing to help, "newspapers are not individuals. They are primarily merely records of current happenings."

Mr. Bepper's hazel-gray eyes turned on the younger girl, and Mr. Bepper waited, in his disconcerting way, for further statement. Hallie felt forced to go on, though she had no immediate addition to make to her remark.

"It's like a bulletin board," she said, slowly; "*The Clarion* is, I mean."

"Do you mean that you, as editors, exercise no discretion as to what you will print?" asked the

old man, quickly, his eyes snapping open again, alight with spirit.

"Oh, no, sir; of course not that. We have to —edit."

"Then, without calling your attention to any past inconsistencies in your conduct, my dear young lady, I may say you are proposing to do an impossible thing. You are proposing to discriminate as to what you will publish, without taking sides."

"We simply won't publish unfair attacks," said the girl, unguardedly.

"Then *The Clarion* is no bulletin-board. You undertake to decide what is fair and what is unfair. That implies perfect knowledge of the facts, doesn't it? And with perfect knowledge of the facts, do you think you can be neutral in any controversy?"

"The courts are, sir. A juryman or a judge must be without bias."

"Until he knows all the facts, only, Miss Rector," smiled Mr. Bepper. "No, your arguments won't hold water, and it's a waste of time to try to calk them. A newspaper must have an

individuality—the individuality of its editors. As no human being can be without opinions and be worth consideration, so no newspaper can be without opinions. With convictions, a man or a newspaper is only honest as he or it is true to them. It cannot be anything but dishonest if it represents what it believes to be untrue or if it straddles a question. There is never any excuse for lack of conviction, except ignorance, and ignorance is no excuse for a newspaper editor."

The three young people listened spell-bound to this analysis of their situation. In Simon Bepper's words, the whole matter seemed to stand out clearly and unanswerably logical and convincing. There was a long moment of silence, after he had concluded. Then Harry moved uneasily.

"And your advertising?" he queried, at last.

"I won't consider any paper that straddles a question so vital to its town," said Mr. Bepper. "Neither will I support a paper that favors the old water company—until I am convinced that that company is doing right."

"But you can't do without advertising," boldly asserted Harry.

"Well, smiled Mr. Bepper, "if worse comes to worst, I can adopt Oliver Oglesby's method."

There was nothing more to be said. The youthful newspaper workers promised to consider Simon Bepper's view of the case, and he dismissed them with a silent nod. They walked back to the office together almost without words.

As they sat down at their desk, however, Marah picked up a penciled note that lay conspicuous, under her paper weight, and before she gave expression to any thought on the recent interview, she read it hastily. Presently, with her face lighting up with a sudden fire of interest and renewed spirit, she handed the sheet across to her chum.

DEAR MARAH AND HALLIE:—

Sorry I missed seeing you. I've been talking to your mothers. Don't you be embarrassed by my loan to you. It was intended to help, not to hinder. You do what seems right to you without fear or favor, and I'll be more than content. Besides it's the *only* way to make a success worth the having.

JENNIE LAWRENCE.

Hallie read the note and looked up. What she saw in her chum's eyes prompted her question. "Then we must take sides?" she asked.

"Yes," returned Marah, "we've got to take sides."

CHAPTER VI

A LIGHTED BOMB

OUT by the composing stone Dick Sanderson was whistling, "Come ye, Disconsolate," in mournful largo. Hallie sat at her desk, trying to make "two sticks" of description out of a supper, given by the Woman's Relief Corps, at which the decorations had been flags only, while baked beans, doughnuts, apple pie and cheese, and coffee had formed the menu. She was attempting to forget the time-honored expressions about New England suppers, and to say something new and fresh that would not seem too obviously the product of effort. Marah was out, after a write-up of the improvements newly undertaken at the Forsythe Hospital, and Harry was soliciting advertising. It was Tuesday again. The days were racing by, for Hallie, as days had never raced before. Weekly editions of *The Clarion* seemed to come so close together as to make the once-sug-

gested idea of transforming the paper into a daily seem more than ever an impossible dream. So many happenings crowded themselves into every twelve hours of daylight, that, but for the little celluloid calendar on her desk, she would frequently have become confused as to the identity of individual days.

Suspense was high at the beginning of this week. Endicott Wiles was prolonging his stay in New York beyond his expectations, and his lieutenants in bank and water company were unable or unwilling to give the young editors help or advice as to their most pressing problem. When the previous week's edition of the paper had been issued without notice in its columns of the Oglesby poster episode, it had seemed to them immediately that some person or persons must be actively fomenting feeling against them, because the tone of the criticisms heard was more serious than at any earlier time. Several people in the town were outspokenly hostile to *The Clarion;* some were openly contemptuous. The hot summer was progressing and the inadequate water supply was making it-

self felt as it had the summer before, while naturally, as August days approached, people grew no better tempered over unsatisfactory conditions.

Harry reported that Carey Trottle, discharged printer, had become an active enemy, indeed, but it could hardly be credited that the influence of irate or even violent talk from him could weigh with sober citizens. Carey, it appeared, was hanging about the streets, unemployed and making no effort to discover employment, finding vocation enough now, in bitter railings against his former employers, in continually pointed or pointless ridicule and in prophesies of an evil end for their enterprise. Dick Sanderson was of the opinion that Carey was responsible for the tricks of false items and the telephone message which had led Marah into an embarrassing position. He said that a remark or two of Carey's, which he had heard repeated had seemed to point to his guilt in those matters. But either because the man's first efforts to annoy the editors had proved unsuccessful in the main, or because he was less

persistent than clever in such undertakings, they had found no repetitions of his effort.

Meantime, Marah, her spirits raised somewhat by Miss Lawrence's attitude, which that good little lady emphasized in later conversation, following her note, was beginning to insist on going straight forward and printing all the news, and upon making such editorial comment as the truth seemed to demand. Hallie had given half willing assent, and Harry was now at work among the advertisers, armed with a promise based on this resolve.

But Hallie was specially unhappy in the midst of all this because of a single apparently unrelated thing. Mrs. Dorothea Hargreave had sent out invitations for her delayed musical, which was now announced to be the last social event at that lady's home before her departure for the mountains, and neither of the two young editors had received one.

Knowledge of the coming event had arrived through Harry, of course, who was naturally ignorant of the social hopes of either of his friends. The date was now fixed for the follow-

ing week, and was recorded in the office "assignment book," but the two girls had been as completely ignored as if Mrs. Dorothea Hargreave had never heard of them. Hallie had been unable to get any expression on the subject from Marah, after a first shrug of the shoulders over the situation, but the younger girl found herself nursing her disappointment, with a feeling of humiliation and pain that was in proportion to her delight in that long gone but vividly remembered happy day at Mrs. Wiles' home.

It seemed like a direct, intentional affront. Dorothea Hargreave had spoken to both girls specially of this expected event, and had given them to understand that they were to be among her guests. Now, after weeks of delay, she appeared to have forgotten that she had done anything of the kind. And in Hallie's heart of hearts, she connected the social slight with the newspaper situation.

Subtle, indeed, was the bearing of this matter upon the state of her mind, and upon her attitude towards *The Clarion's* future policy. She did not herself know that it influenced her at

all. But the thought of offending Endicott Wiles anew by fresh meddling with the water question lay heavy upon her. Despite the clarity the whole question had seemed to take under the light Simon Bepper's comments had thrown upon it, the matter had become foggy to her again, and she could not feel Marah's new singleness of purpose.

So her heart was heavy, these hot, dry, dusty days, when work was hard enough at best. She found herself sometimes actually wishing she could lay down the fat pencil on the fresh sheets of paper and walk away out of the office, shirking the whole load once for all. She knew that, if she should really do such a thing it would be to mourn bitterly over a failure, to feel shame at cowardice and to despise herself for a weakling who could not shoulder a genuine burden and carry it. But she was tired—tired of outside criticism, of inner questionings, of what seemed now to be thankless work, and of heavy anxiety. She had never known such things in all her young life before, and she felt every pang keenly. To make it all heavier, she had

grown tired, perhaps, just a little ashamed, of talking to her mother about it all. And she thought the origin of the shame was the consciousness of weakness.

That Tuesday morning, therefore, she was not in a mood to be made hilarious when Harry Wiles came in at eleven o'clock with Simon Bepper's order for the renewal of his advertising, with the understanding that *The Clarion* was to become the champion of improvement in the water service. To her, it meant the lifting of one kind of trouble, only to the aggravation of another. The soliciting and acceptance of that order committed the editors to practical hostility to Endicott Wiles. Harry was not in the least concerned, but Hallie could see only unhappy consequences. She was not conscious of any reason why, as she sat, looking at Harry's pleased face over the new advertisement, but she was also seeing the face and figure of Mrs. Simon Bepper, who happened to be rather a plain, unstylish little woman, who was quite inconspicuous in Pentwater's social life. When Harry presently expressed the hope that Win-

throp Prase would now renew his patronage of the paper's columns, she saw Mrs. Winthrop Prase, also, whom she did not like, and was unaware that she was comparing mental pictures of her with the once-gracious young Mrs. Hargreave and distinguished Mrs. Wiles. But she knew that the emotions Harry's news and his prophesies stirred, were not pleasant ones.

But Marah showed elation enough when she heard of Harry's success. She seemed to be growing surer of her position now, instead of less sure. She seemed happier. She did not have so much to say of the predicament in which she and her friend were caught, and she appeared to have recovered the early verve and zest in her work, which both girls had felt to be taken from it for awhile. And Hallie grew more and more sick-hearted as she contemplated her chum's better content. Once that day, as Harry and Marah busied themselves together with Dick over the composition of Simon Bepper's new advertisement, she heard their talk and cheerful laughter with a sudden feeling that she herself was being left out; and she came

back to reasoning sense with a consciousness that her face was burning with a flush of anger.

She did not know what the trouble was. She could not see clearly. She felt as if the weariness had so gotten into her brain as to make it refuse to contemplate the pros and cons any more, so that they were persistently obscure. That night at home, she was so silent that her mother questioned her as to whether new difficulties had arisen, and she was almost impatient in the way in which she evaded the query. She went to bed early, quite aware that her mood was one of irritable touchiness. But when, after she had lain awake for a long restless hour or two, her mother stole softly into her room in the darkness, opened her window a bit wider for better air and drew the shade a trifle lower to shield tired eyes from too early light, she found herself miserably unable to obey the impulse to call out to her. When her mother bent over the bed an instant to look silently down at her, the daughter wanted to reach up and clasp her round the neck, and weep out the whole sore burden of her heart then and there. But she

shut her eyes, instead, and wondered why the burden was sore, while her mother went softly out and away.

Hallie woke Wednesday morning unrefreshed and started the new day with a feeling of distaste and dread unusual to her. She was late at the office and the others who were ahead of her indulged in some badinage on this point that seemed to annoy her far more than any chaffing would usually do. She knew that she showed her mood, too, despite an effort to laugh and make cheerful replies, for both Marah and Harry very soon ceased to make playful remarks, and she saw her chum look curiously at her several times, with her own peculiar sidelong questioning glance past her glasses.

But she felt perversely irritable about everything: irritable because the new printer's proof was not very clean, because telephone calls persistently interrupted her reading of it, because Dick Sanderson chose to whistle endlessly, "Shall We Gather at the River?", because Harry seemed to be getting into the habit of deferring to Marah in everything rather than to

herself. She wrote items concerning the coming and going of townspeople—how Mrs. Margaret Wells was visiting Mrs. Hugh Pennert, at Foxville; how Cyrus Hanaker, of Blue Ridge, Sundayed in Pentwater; how Jefferson D. Axworthy was entertaining his cousin Foster Axworthy of Denver;—without trying to vary her phraseology or escape old, print-worn phrases. She knew she was behaving like a petulant child, and hated herself and her duties the more for the consciousness. But she did not know where lay the root of the trouble. She told herself that she was generally upset. She could have broken down and cried at almost any moment during the long hot forenoon. But she did not. She found no such relief.

After luncheon, however, Harry went to Brighton to see a prospective advertiser there, who hoped to sell wares in Pentwater, Marah started out to attend a picnic of the Presbyterian Sunday School, because she had a class of youngsters to shepherd, and Hallie found herself alone to the office duties. She shut the door of the editorial room, for the feeling of privacy

it gave her, and felt a little better. She plunged into her work with determination to find a cure in it for the ills of her spirits.

It was thus that Mr. Oliver Oglesby found her when he came to *The Clarion's* office for the first time since the day his posters had appeared.

"May I come in, Miss—Rector?" he asked, hesitating a bit over her name, conveying thereby both an odd suggestion of special respect and a sort of tentative offering of the olive branch.

His handsome brown eyes, his big, wholesome presence, his friendly smile seemed to have a sort of tonic effect on the lonely, unhappy Hallie. She smiled a welcome to him that recognized also and forgave the apparent hostility of his last move.

"I've got something I want to ask you to print, of course," said the big young man, coming in, laying his big straw hat on Marah's side of the desk, and taking the visitor's chair.

"Of course," returned Hallie amusedly.

"But I hear you've decided to open your columns to both sides, and that's as much as anybody could ask. It's so, isn't it?"

"We're not going to shut them against fair statements," answered Hallie.

Mr. Oglesby opened a wide sheet of paper. "I have no statement to make, this time," he said. "I simply want you to print some *facts* I have here, and let them tell their own story."

Hallie felt the humor of the visit fading out, as he laid the wide sheet before her, and she saw columns of a tabulated record with a bold heading across the top:

Record of Water Failures.

It purported to be a detailed history of the discomforts, and privations, caused to Pentwater people during the previous summer season by inadequacies of the water supply furnished by the Wiles Company, with the statements of two engineers regarding the system of mains and branches in the town and its shortcomings in relation to service promised by the company. It contained technical terms and figures that made it slow reading to Hallie, but she was quick to grasp its significance and to see that it was comprehensive.

"I'll vouch for its correctness," said Mr.

Oglesby. "If necessary, I'll produce my engineers and give affidavits. But there's what happened in Pentwater last summer and what is being repeated this summer with some aggravation. People without proper supply of water, fire-hydrants tested and dry, stringent sprinkling rules, high rates compared with other towns which have better service, the threat and risk of the future under the same conditions—it's all demonstrated in that record of water failures. And it's all facts. I could make Endicott Wiles himself admit it, or perjure himself, if I could get him under oath. You won't object to that as an unfair statement, will you?"

After the first minute, Hallie looked at the wide sheet full of figures with unseeing eyes. Instead of the columns of tabulations, she had a vision of certain of *The Clarion's* regular readers, as they might look when this should be spread upon half a printed page of their home paper. She knew without further argument from Oliver Oglesby that this summary of the ills of the complaining people would be like a bomb exploded in the heart of the town. It

would be like a bomb to Endicott Wiles himself —and presumably to his family. It would be almost like printing suddenly a criminal record newly discovered. It would be a declaration of war, more certainly than anything else *The Clarion* could print. And she could see the effect of it, in surprised, eager, exultant or angry faces of the people she knew who cared, as if the faces were, one after another, actually held up before her.

"You'll print that, won't you?" asked Mr. Oglesby again, after waiting considerable time for her answer.

"How do you know it is all facts?" asked Hallie helplessly, her mind halting before a decision so momentous. She did not really question the record.

"I've made a careful canvass of water users. My engineers are men of standing." Mr. Oglesby appeared to consider these two facts sufficient answer.

Hallie lost herself again in her vision. She saw Simon Bepper's bright hazel-gray eyes gleaming above his pallid fingers on his beard;

she saw Dr. Barrister's sarcastic grin; she saw Winthrop Prase's humorous, but eager interest. And she saw Endicott Wiles' dark grave face drawn into hard lines about the eyes and mouth. And then, oddly enough again, she saw Dorothea Hargreave's pretty brows raised in cool hauteur. And it was on the last two faces her mental vision dwelt longest.

"I'll have to consult——" she began slowly, when she became conscious that Mr. Oglesby was waiting for her reply.

"Of course," he said, not waiting for her to finish. "Consult your partner. But not Endicott Wiles." He laughed.

"He's out of town," returned Hallie.

"Yes, I know," said Mr. Oglesby. "He's pretty regularly out of town this summer. Well, I'll leave it at that, then. I'm glad you aren't going to try to support Wiles, you know. That would be an impossible position for you."

He rose from his chair, took up the big hat and nodded pleasantly at Hallie as he turned to the door. "You'll print it," he added, as if quite certain of the fact.

"I see no reason for—for not printing it," answered Hallie, feeling as if she had been almost hypnotized into the admission.

For a long time after her visitor had gone, Hallie sat staring at the desk and the wide paper upon it. At the end of that time she drew her telephone toward her and took down the receiver. A moment later she was talking to Mr. Cornelius McGrain, secretary and manager of the water company.

"Mr. McGrain," she said, "did you know that Mr. Oliver Oglesby has prepared a record of water failures in this town, which he expects to print?"

"Yes," answered the secretary, quickly and surprisingly, "I know it."

"May I bring it down to show it to you?" asked Hallie.

"Unnecessary, quite," returned terse Mr. McGrain. "It's a pack of lies—though you needn't quote me as saying so."

"It's all in figures," said Hallie.

"Even so. So are the election prophesies. That doesn't make 'em true."

"Will you give me an interview on it?"

"Nix. Wait till Mr. Wiles gets home."

"I can't," said Hallie. "We're criticized now for not printing both sides."

"Well you'd better be sure of your facts before you print 'em. There's still a live libel-law in this state, you know."

Mr. McGrain was so very terse, that Hallie presently hung up her receiver again. Then she sat once more silent and absorbed through a long, long quarter of an hour. At last she took up the wide sheet of tabulations, folded it slowly into its crisp creases, and held it consideringly before her.

"I know what Marah will say," she whispered softly to herself; "but Marah's in a mood to be hasty now. And Mr. Wiles ought to have a fair chance, too."

She opened the drawer of her desk slowly and slipped the folded sheet into it. Then she turned to her work once more.

What complicated thoughts were passing then through Hallie Rector's mind, and what others followed them during the next twenty-

four hours, it would be difficult to record. Afterwards, Hallie herself could not recall all the processes of her reasoning. But it was five o'clock next day, and that week's edition of *The Clarion,* containing Simon Bepper's advertisement, but not Oliver Oglesby's contribution, was in the post office, when she sat again in the editorial room, with a closed door, this time with her partner and chum opposite her. And it was then, for the first time, that she drew out again the sheet of the tabulations.

"Marah," she said slowly, handing the paper across the desk, "Mr. Oglesby brought this in late yesterday."

Marah looked at the heading of the tabulated columns and then at some of the figures and dates in the list. Hallie waited for her eyes to come up again to her own. When they did, she knew that a crisis had arrived.

"Didn't Mr. Oglesby want this published?" asked Marah slowly.

"Yes," answered Hallie, "but I couldn't bring myself to let it be printed without Mr. Wiles' sanction." She knew her voice trembled on the

last words despite her care to keep it steady.

"Why didn't you show it to me this morning?" asked her friend, half incredulous of the other's statement.

"I was afraid you'd insist on publishing it," said Hallie, painfully.

Marah regarded her with a strange look of growing concern. "But, Hallie!" she exclaimed suddenly, and stopped.

"I know," returned Hallie, "but Mr. Wiles would never forgive us if we printed that in his absence."

"It isn't that, Hallie," said Marah, folding her hands and locking her fingers tightly, "but we were pledged to Mr. Bepper, you see. We've broken our promise."

CHAPTER VII

AFTERSIGHT

IT is a much easier feat of the imagination to see our own acts with other people's vision after than before they have been completed.

Hallie found out this truth that afternoon and next day, as first consequences of what she had done began to show. It was then that she tried to reconstruct the thoughts that had led to her action, and couldn't. She knew she had been fearful, unhappy, bitter and confused, that was all. She had cried after she had told Marah about her act, and again at home later, when she gave her mother an account of the affair; but Marah had not had much to say to her, and her mother seemed not to understand. Both were kind and both tried to comfort her, but neither reached the depths of the trouble. Both seemed puzzled and distressed and unwilling to blame her, but neither said the word that brought a full unburdening from the girl.

When Oliver Oglesby came to the office in the morning with a copy of *The Clarion* in his hand and asked why his record of water failures had not been printed, Marah told him that "it had been thought best to hold them over, for further consideration," thereby taking a share of the responsibility upon herself to shield her friend. When Mr. Oglesby promptly and frankly stated that they had thereby broken their word, as given to the advertisers, the girl said she would discuss that with the advertisers, and Mr. Oglesby apologized for the remark. But he went away clearly angry, and Hallie, who had been only a listener, saw tears in Marah's eyes when she sat again at her desk.

Harry came in, perhaps an hour after Mr. Oglesby's call and sat wearily down with a gesture of upturned palms, as if he were giving up a fight. "Say," he said, "Bepper's canceled again, and says he won't pay for his ad of yesterday, because it was given with the understanding that Oglesby's stuff was to be printed."

It was then that something in Hallie's heart seemed suddenly to give way. She knew that

the letter of the charge made by Mr. Bepper was not just, but she also knew that his conclusion—and Oliver Oglesby's also—was the only possible one from their standpoint, after the comparison of notes which had obviously taken place.

"It's all my fault," she said, as she sat back in her chair, with tears streaming down her face. "I don't know what was the matter with me, but I thought I just couldn't do one more thing to offend Mr. Wiles. I don't know whether it's cowardice or what it is. I know it isn't just loyalty to Mr. Wiles. I think it's a dread of his anger—and, oh, Marah, of Mrs. Wiles' and Mrs. Hargreave's displeasure!"

Harry stared at her mystified. "What have they got to do with it?" he asked almost brutally.

"Oh, nothing!" cried Hallie, suddenly realizing Harry's relationship to the two women.

"Well why——?" began Harry.

But Marah interrupted him. "Your mother and sister have been very courteous to us, Harry, and we—like them so much."

Harry's face glowed. "Mother *is* a brick,

isn't she?" he said. "And Dorothea's all right, only too bossy. But, say, mother wouldn't care if you ripped the water company up the back. And Dot doesn't count. Why do you mind? And Dad,—well, he's only getting what's coming to him, I guess, and he wouldn't bust up the paper, if only because of the looks of such a thing. Cheer up! There's lots of worse things going to happen! Anyhow, don't cry. If you do, I got to get out. I can't stand a damp climate."

Hallie tried to stop her tears. She covered them with her handkerchief, and suddenly, in the light of her own confession, she saw where the truth, the real inner truth of her trouble lay. She looked across at Marah and saw in the other's clear eyes, which were characteristically peering past the side of the glasses, that something which had threatened the sympathy between them had been swept away. The younger girl put her head down upon her arms on her desk and sobbed.

Harry rose from his chair as if a spring had been released under him. He found that press-

ing matters required his attention in the composing room. When he stood at Dick Sanderson's shoulder, a moment later, and heard the office door close gently behind him, he shrugged with complete failure to understand.

"Girls are funny propositions, Dick," he remarked with a grin.

"Eh?" returned Dick. Then the foreman grinned also. "Yes," he assented, "ain't they?"

It was through a curious jumble of half finished sentences and inarticulate sounds that Hallie and Marah reached an understanding. Neither of them ever related any portion of what passed behind the editorial room door. When it was opened again, both were somewhat flushed and Marah's eyes were wet also; but both seemed ready for new activities. And business took up its usual routine for a time.

It was Harry again who broke in upon partially restored peace about noon, however. He came in with a curiously quiet air and stood by the editorial desk impressively silent till both girls looked up at him.

"What do you think is up now?" he asked,

with his youthfully cynical grin. "Oglesby's called a public meeting for to-night, to talk it all over, water question, Dad and newspaper!"

"A meeting of citizens!" exclaimed Marah.

"Yes," answered Harry. "And he's the greatest little citizen of all, it seems. Funny how the interests of this town have touched his manly heart. He's awfully concerned that the people up at the west end should get daily baths."

Harry's news had abundant confirmation quickly. Before mid-afternoon a new series of posters had appeared announcing the public meeting at the opera house, and before evening the town was buzzing with gossip of it. It was therefore a foregone conclusion that the place of meeting would be crowded, when eight o'clock came, because a large proportion of the townspeople were vitally interested and the rest relished a show without an admission fee.

Hallie and Marah, conscious that they could better gauge the real temper of the town by attending this meeting than in any other way, easily persuaded Phil Whittlesey to accompany

them to the opera house. Harry was delegated to report the proceedings, but both girls went prepared for events that might create a crisis for *The Clarion.*

They were not disappointed. Oliver Oglesby, supported by Simon Bepper, Winthrop Prase, Attorney Blaine Ferris, and others, occupied the platform, and when the auditorium was packed to suffocation, the young promoter led the speaking, with direct attack upon existing conditions that left no doubt as to the tone the meeting would take.

He began by charging failure and incompetence or willful disregard of the people's needs against the old water company, and people were first startled and then uproariously pleased with his flat, sharp statements of well-known facts. When he read from the platform the tabulated record of water failures, which he had offered *The Clarion,* he did not mention the fact that the paper had had an opportunity to print it, perhaps because he surmised that the young editors might be present. But when, after stirring cheers by the assertion that the wretched

condition of affairs in the town must be changed, he stated what his company was ready to do, the citizens shouted a welcome to his proposals that seemed conclusively to show that the path to success for his plans was opening.

Winthrop Prase spoke briefly after Mr. Oglesby finished. His sarcastic remarks about the doings of the water company raised gales of appreciative laughter. Then Blaine Ferris drawled out a series of jokes, with less vicious sting in them but with better presentation of sound fact and argument, and the house rang again with approval.

Hallie, Marah and Phil had found seats about the center of the house. From her chair, Hallie listened with slowly renewing and deepening understanding of the vitality of the question discussed to the majority of these people. For the first time since she had commenced work on the newspaper, she became conscious that she herself had been occupying a curious position among her own home-town people. She suddenly awoke to the fact that she had been thinking and feeling like an outsider,

rather than like a member of this little community, with its interests at heart. She had not even been a mere spectator; she had had a sense of antagonism. She had not consciously stood with Endicott Wiles' interests, against them, but she had been unconsciously doing so, it seemed. She had first a queer sensation of newly discovered estrangement from neighbors and friends, several of whom sat near her, and who seemed much more deeply stirred over this question of water than she had supposed. Then she abruptly realized that there was something actual at the bottom of her feeling.

Flushes of shame over her own action with regard to the Oglesby incident followed each other upon her cheeks as she listened to earnest statement and heated criticism. Somehow the thing came home to her as it had not done before, and she seemed to have laid her hands upon a matter she had utterly failed to understand. She was half frightened at the new sense of responsibility forced upon her, and at the fresh glimpse of the trivial motives which she now saw had been ruling ones with her.

Dumbly she charged herself with being a snob, a sycophant, a toady, to whom the opinion of the rich, their favor, or the fear of their frowns, had counted more than the just vital interests of people who had fewer favors to offer her. And she grew sick with the sense of her own paltry and blind selfishness.

The meeting was stirring enough from the beginning to create a fever heat among the people. But a sensation for which no one had looked developed after perhaps an hour of speaking, when amid a suddenly spreading hush, no less a personage than Endicott Wiles himself appeared alone in the aisle of the theater, walking quietly down toward the stage, with evident intent to be seen and heard.

Even Harry had not known that his father had returned from New York that evening, and the unexpectedness of the banker's appearance to others who knew he was away, was like an apparition. It was just at the end of Blaine Ferris' remarks; and the sudden silence that fell upon the applauding people, as the knowledge of Mr. Wiles' presence fled among them, tes-

tified eloquently to their recognition of the dramatic nature of the incident.

Just what Mr. Wiles' own plan of procedure had been does not appear, but he was not a man to let pass opportunity such as the moment offered him. He turned to the big audience, as he reached the orchestra railing and waved his hand to them, with a smile of good fellowship.

"I heard that you were gathered to unite in criticism of me, friends and neighbors," he said, in his fine, resonant voice that was heard to the farthest corner of the theater. "I've been listening awhile and have found you frank; I'm going to ask you to let me say a frank word also."

The tense moment continued. There was a start towards hand clapping in a box over at one side, but it died quickly. Endicott Wiles stood quiet, looking about at the packed house slowly and quite unabashed, and Hallie, watching him, thrilled with admiration of this sort of power of men who did things to face their crises without flinching, and to show fight, even when the battle seemed against them. Endicott Wiles' cause was his own selfish financial interest,

which she was wholly convinced at last was not his town's interest; but there was something fine about the way he had walked down into the front of that theater full of hostile people and had turned at bay, as it were. And suddenly, it occurred to Hallie that no human quality seemed more worth while than the quality of courage, and that none seemed meaner than cowardice. Her heart leaped, and she felt the spur of impulse. Her opportunity for courage lay before her, and her cause was not a selfish one.

But the effect of Endicott Wiles' braving of his critics—some people called it mere effrontery, afterwards—was marred by another occurrence quite as unexpected as his entrance. Before he had an opportunity to begin upon any dignified defense he may have contemplated, a rude interruption came in a sudden bawling voice from the side of the gallery.

"Say, End'cott Wiles! Say, who paid *The Clarion* not to print th' facts?"

An instant shout of laughter broke the spell the man by the orchestra railing had magically

spun. There was an instant turning of hundreds of faces, with the sound of moving bodies and the clatter of feet. And then the spirit of hostility to Endicott Wiles came again and shattered the awe of him, and a yell of encouragement went up to the man in the gallery that seemed to sweep that individual up to his feet. In a moment of vivid wonder at the relation of past events to this moment, Hallie suddenly recognized Carey Trottle.

Conscious immediately of the singular fact that the crowd was with him, the printer, who was, as usual, somewhat intoxicated, followed up his first successful sally.

"What'd you run 'way for when—Oglesby comes t' town?" he howled.

Again the crowd laughed. The drunken man's tongue seemed controlled by a mischievous spirit that prompted telling words.

"Are you buyin' new pipe for the west end or investin' in N' York real estate with yer water money?" yelled Carey.

Shouts of amusement and satisfaction at this rude expression of the popular grievance

drowned for a moment both further question and attempt at reply. Abruptly from all parts of the house, a babel of demands began to come, which waited for no answers, and which soon degenerated into jeering cries with cat-calls and whistling of the gallery hoodlums raising it to a tumult.

For a moment or two, Endicott Wiles stood facing the storm, with a set face on which slowly grew a look of savage indignation. Then as the shouting reached the point of mere noisy ridicule and abuse, he slowly turned, surveyed first one side and then the other of the auditorium, and finally walked, deliberate and erect, straight back up the aisle the way he had come and disappeared at the back of the house.

A hush fell upon the crowd almost as quickly as it had fallen at the banker's first appearance, and Hallie became aware that, on the platform, Oliver Oglesby was attempting to be heard. But before his words became distinguishable, Carey Trottle burst out with a final taunt flung after the retreating magnate.

'S right—run away, End'cott Wiles," he

barked. 'S nobody's business—but yours, hey? 'S nobody's newspaper—but yours, too, hey? 'S nobody's town, either—except yours, ain't it, End'cott Wiles?"

Some one near Hallie turned abruptly and looked laughingly in the girl's face with evident recognition and with relish of the thrust at *The Clarion*. And Hallie's excited mind conceived the notion that attention was about to center upon herself and her chum. Panic like nothing she had ever known seized her heart.

She never knew just how she got out of the opera house. She found herself in the street with Marah and Phil at her side, both excited and querying as to the reason for her flight. She was quickly startled and ashamed, but Marah seemed presently to understand and Phil was soon remarking that many other people were also leaving the theater, either in sympathy with the Wiles faction or in offense at the behavior of the crowd, so that the exit of the newspaper's editors could hardly have been conspicuous.

There was little conversation during the brief

walk home and Hallie saw no one else that night, except her mother, who was more concerned to get her feverish girl to bed than to hear details of the meeting. Sunday she was practically ill all day with a headache and did not get up. So it was Monday morning, at the office, that she heard from Harry the details of how the meeting had broken up with nothing accomplished, because no speaker seemed to hold the audience after Carey Trottle had been silenced. The printer, indeed, had become so obstreperous after his amazing minute or two in the limelight, that it had become necessary to eject him from the place; and the disturbance had seemed to sap all the interest from the meeting for the better class of people.

But things happened too fast that morning to allow of much consideration of events of the night before. First, Mr. Wiles himself came to the office, looking grave and uncompromising, and the first question he asked precipitated the opposition of wills. He desired to know what the youthful editors proposed to print in the way of an account of the meeting; and in a

moment discussion of the paper's whole policy was up again.

But Mr. Wiles' patience was short that morning. Before the girls felt that their story was half told, he began to express himself, and his expression quickly took on the nature of an ultimatum. So the girls did not care to support him against malicious gossip, then? That meant that they intended to turn against him. Had they no sense of their obligation to him? Did they interpret his promise to leave them free to run the paper according to their own judgment to mean that they were free to use it as a weapon to attack him? Mr. Wiles grew angry. He attributed motives and intentions to the young editors that angered them in turn. He criticized them severely, he questioned their loyalty, he doubted their gratitude, he accused them of popularity-hunting.

Of course, the only immediate end of this was something very like a quarrel, and Mr. Wiles left the office in irate mood, as if with the purpose of immediately ending relations with them once and for all. Both girls had a season of

great distress, and then they made up their minds that they could only face the worst and make the best of it. Oddly enough, Hallie was quite as cool as Marah and as determined, in the final conversation; but she had fought out her battle now and made up her mind to sacrifice. And a strange little persistent memory of the look of Endicott Wiles himself, as he faced the crowded auditorium the night before, had to do with her own resolution.

And then, as if all troubles must pour upon them at once, three advertisers, other than those already withdrawn, telephoned in stop orders, and nine stop subscriptions arrived in a single noon mail. And Hallie had a recurrence of the Henny-Penny feeling when Harry casually revealed the fact that his sister, Mrs. Dorothea Hargreave, was to give her musical, with the famous pianist as the guest of honor, that same evening, and had told him that she "did not wish to have anything in the paper about it." And when Harry was quick to see that this news appeared to have special significance for his friends, he did not help matters any by adding

the volunteer statement that, "You know, Dot is as hot-headed as Dad is, and is sore on the whole outfit down here."

If there was a spark of something warmer than cool recognition of duty in the spirit in which Marah and Hallie wrote a final statement of their position to Mr. Wiles that night, and despatched it by hand of Harry, when he went home, it might surely have been attributed to excitement rather than to lack of gratitude. This was the note that went:

DEAR MR. WILES:—

We've made sad troubles for ourselves by trying to be on both sides or on neither side of the water question. We can't dodge any longer; we feel that we must print the news as it is, and take the consequences. We do appreciate your help of us, but we beg of you to try to see the impossibility of any other action for us.

Yours very truly,

MARAH WHITTLESEY.
HALLIE RECTOR.

CHAPTER VIII

NO ROOM FOR HOPE

WHEN Harry Wiles failed to appear at the office with the coming of another day, Marah and Hallie looked upon it as a sign that the end was at hand.

"I don't believe he's deserted," said Marah, "but he's no longer an ally, I judge."

"We may as well sing our swan-song then, I suppose," suggested Hallie, with the cheerfulness of one who has no further hopes which can meet with disappointment.

But Marah took the suggestion seriously. "We will do just that," she announced.

"We've worked hard here for a good many weeks and it looks as if the only thing we are going to get out of the enterprise is a bruised reputation with our friends. I think we have the right to—'square ourselves,' as Harry would say."

"How do you mean?" asked Hallie, eagerly.

"Oh, I'd be thankful to stand just where we did when we began, and to be thought as well of as I hope we were then. Oh, Marah, think of that day at Mrs. Wiles' reception! I was puffed up to the skies then, with my notion of people's opinion of us. Isn't it ever the way of the haughty spirit?"

"I don't mind the experience—now it's over," returned Marah. "But I'm going to have one last fling—in type—if Mr. Wiles doesn't close us up before press-day."

"Oh, but it won't be over, even then!" mourned Hallie. "Miss Lawrence's thousand dollars! Just think of our setting out to save five hundred dollars apiece on probable salaries of from thirty to fifty dollars a month!"

"That's our medicine," murmured Marah.

"I can feel my youth slipping through my fingers!" averred Hallie trying to make fun, while her heart was weighing heavily at this discussion of the cold fact of their debt.

"Of course we won't lose it all, Hallie," assured her friend. "Or, at least, there's a chance that we won't. If Mr. Wiles chooses to fore-

close on us, he'll have to allow some value for that portion of the investment. But he may refuse to allow us any cash for it, and I'm not enthusiastic with hope over the prospect of getting returns from any future owner of the paper."

"Well, what's the swan-song?" asked Hallie, willing to leave the subject.

"We've been printing statements for two sides of this controversy," responded Marah; "let's print one for ourselves. Let's publish a fair and square account of the whole affair from the beginning, every word of the truth, and let the people of this town know what our difficulties have been. Then maybe they'll forgive us."

"A—a confession?"

"Yes, a confession, if you like."

"Do you mean to tell *our* story from the beginning just as it was—to show just what our relation to Mr. Wiles has been?"

"Exactly."

The idea was growing in both minds as the two discussed it. It began to take a seriousness for Hallie, as she watched her chum's face

change from the not wholly successful effort to smile into frankly earnest gravity. A sudden longing for the privilege of telling the whole painful truth, of winning back an unquestioned standing with these people of the village, with whom she had temporarily lost sympathy, came upon her.

"Will you write it, Marah?" she asked, quite forgetful of all notion of jesting.

"Yes," answered Marah. "I'll write a first draft of it, and then we'll go over it together. I shall tell the whole truth, Hallie, even though it may not be very creditable to us."

"Not very creditable to *me,*" amended Hallie.

"We are jointly responsible," returned Marah," for everything that's been done, and we're partners. I mean simply that we'll acknowledge our faults where we see them. It's the only way to convince people of our sincerity. It's the only way to *be* sincere."

"I guess the only way to convince people that you are anything is to *be* it," assented Hallie.

Marah pulled a pad of paper toward her and

dipped a pen. Hallie watched her for a moment with a feeling that this act had a finality for one portion of their lives, like the setting of the period at the end of a paragraph. Presently she rose and went out into the shop, and asked Dick if there was any of Harry's work that needed finishing up. Learning that one considerable piece of job printing for the Wiles bank was partly finished and waiting for corrected proofs, she made it her immediate task to go down the street to the bank, to ask for them.

In the street that morning the August sun was bright and hot. The air was very still. A few people were out upon business but there was comparatively little activity. Hallie walked slowly along the hot board sidewalk of the block in which the newspaper office was, subconsciously speculating as to how long it might be before it would give way at last to cement, while she was really thinking principally that there seemed to be a pause upon everything about her, reflecting curiously the situation in her own sadly arrested affairs.

As she crossed the street to approach the

bank, she noticed an automobile standing in front of that institution, with a chauffeur at the wheel; and as she neared the place she saw the door of the bank open, at the top of the flight of iron steps leading from the street, and a tall, stately lady came out, a man following her.

Hallie stopped short, as she instantly recognized Mrs. Wiles, and she was next moment aware that the man with her was Endicott Wiles himself. Both were laughing pleasantly with some one who was bowing them out. The girl felt that she could not meet them and she stepped in close to a show-window of the store at her side, and stood in the semi-obscurity of an awning's shadow.

A bank porter followed Mr. Wiles from the door, with a suit-case, a coat and an armful of miscellaneous articles, that promptly suggested departure from town, and Hallie half forgot her diffidence in the sudden thoughts that this simple situation raised. Here were success, wealth, luxury, power, ease, all evidenced by the motor-car, the waiting chauffeur, the laden porter, the journey-hinting luggage, the very air

of possession and command of the man and the woman themselves. Here was care-free independence, fearless assurance, self-sufficiency. Here was a revealing glimpse of the life of Endicott Wiles and his proud wife, slipped before the watcher's eyes like the cross section of some rare, beautiful plant laid upon the microscope slide. The observing girl suddenly seemed to see the wonderful structure, the fiber of the life of these rich people, so utterly different from her own. She saw the contrast, the violent, glaring contrast, of which her sudden stop at sight of this man and woman, her shrinking back out of view, her wondering, unexpectantly, distantly envious thoughts about them, were sufficiently illuminatingly characteristic. They were the royalty, the superior race, the masters made by money; she was of the slaves, the underlings, the cowards of poverty. Here was she, facing bitter disappointment, the wreck of great hopes and ambitions, serious financial straits, debt, the loss of friends. Endicott Wiles and his wife faced none of these things. They were above them. Touched by

the same popular defeat that was cataclysmic to her, Endicott Wiles was indifferent, amused, happy. And of course it was only the possession of money that made him immune, and the lack of it that made her suffer.

Money was the thing worth while, of course. It was always so. It was foolish to contend or believe otherwise. Money made the things that everybody desired and warded off the ills. What ill could be equal to poverty, mean, narrow, servile, dependent, groveling poverty? It was hideous to be poor! It was bitter; it was outrageous! Money made comfort, ease delight. It made friends. What one of all that crowd in the opera house who had united to jeer at the banker in the excitement of a feverish moment, would not turn friend, and willingly, to the rich man when the temporary clash was past? Yes, money would buy friends!

The girl in the shadow of the awning had a momentary taste of class hatred, as she watched the big motor-car roll away down the street. She had a momentary feeling that she had glimpsed a truth, a mean, sordid thing indeed,

but none the less a truth. When the motor turned the corner below in a cloud of dust, she mounted the bank steps, with a sense of lost illusion, even of shaken faith, that made her feel sick to the heart.

At the cashier's desk she asked Harvey Manning for the proofs of the bank's printing job. Mr. Manning was a tall, affable, bald-headed man, who knew Hallie quite well and had always appeared friendly to her. He greeted her pleasantly, but he turned immediately grave, with a suddenly non-committal air when he heard her request. "Oh," he said, "Mr. Wiles asked me to cancel that order. He had to go away early to-day, but he was in and was quite explicit about that."

"I saw him go away just now, in the motor," said Hallie slowly, for no special reason, as this fact had no application to the case.

"*Did* you?" said Mr. Manning, politely. "Yes, he's motoring up to the mountains with Mrs. Wiles and the Hargreaves. He'll be back in a few days, if you want to see him. He's just gone to get his family comfortably established."

Hallie turned away and walked out of the bank door. So the bank's order for printing was cancelled! Well, that settled it. Perhaps till now, she had cherished a faint hope that things would somehow straighten out. She had a way of hoping for pleasant endings always in disagreeable situations. It was persistent optimism. But she saw no pleasant ending ahead now nor room for hope.

She found herself wondering bitterly if Harry Wiles was to go that morning "to the mountains," with his people. She had grown to like Harry. He was a rough boy with some offensively bad habits; but he seemed to think straight and to be honest. Could he be the sort who would simply drop connection with the friends who had met the displeasure of his father and of the town by trying to serve both? He had the advantage of riches, too, and why should he feel any call for loyalty to his associates in what had doubtless been a play spell to him? Why, indeed?

She walked into the office with a clouded face, to find Marah smiling and comfortably

chatting with no less a person than Harry Wiles himself.

"Yes," he said, in answer to Hallie's surprised greeting, "the old man's gone to the hills with mother and sis. Oh, yes, he's sore on this newspaper game; but, I want to tell you, he's sort of scared for his pet little water company, too. But he's a little like the lad that's got hold of the handles on the electric battery and can't let go. He knows everybody's got it in for him,—how could he help knowing after Saturday night?—but he can't do anything."

"He could improve the water service," suggested Marah.

"Yes, but that would be admitting that it had been bad—or rather that the town's claims were just. Nix on that for him! He's as proud and stubborn as a game-cock, and as unready to admit that he's whipped. He's going to be whipped in this water fight, though—that's as plain as mud. But he won't admit it, and he'll fight to the finish."

"Well, he's taken the bank printing away

from us," sighed Hallie. "What is he likely to do about the paper?"

"Well," said Harry, "that's one of the handles on the battery. He can't let go of it, without everybody giving him the merry ha, ha! Don't you see? And he doesn't like the laugh. That's what beat him the other night."

"But he wasn't beaten!" exclaimed Hallie.

"Well, I'd call it beaten, if I had tried to talk to a crowd and they wouldn't let me," said Mr. Wiles' son.

"Yes, but they would have let him talk if it hadn't been for Carey Trottle."

"There's always an 'if it hadn't been,' after every fight," said Harry, sapiently.

"Yes," asserted Hallie. "If it hadn't been for this water question we'd never have had to give up the newspaper."

"Give up!" cried Harry. "Why *you* aren't whipped yet. Don't ever give up anything you want, as long as you can stand and see!"

Hallie looked at the boy's youthful face with eyes that seemed to be opening to see the spirit in it for the first time. Suddenly she felt some

of the same thrill upon her she had felt at the sight of Endicott Wiles when he had turned in the aisle of the crowded theater and looked up at the banked faces above him.

"But what can we do?" she asked faintly.

"Stick!" answered Harry briefly. "Do the thing that looks square and wise to you, and hope for the best. You're never down and out as long as you have a choice. I've seen a team win on the gridiron in the last three minutes of play when the other side had the ball for first down on their ten-yard line—and it wasn't a fluke, either."

Hallie knew enough football to understand. Suddenly she laughed. "Did you come down to tell us this, Harry?" she asked.

"Aw, no," said the boy, abruptly embarrassed with the consciousness that he had been preaching. "I don't like to see you get the worst of it, that's all. And the quitter always does get the worst of everything."

"Well, we won't be quitters," said Marah. "Tell me what you think of this?"

She pushed over before Hallie and Harry a pen-written document, headed:

To the People of Pentwater.

Hallie knew at once what it was. She bent over it with Harry and read slowly every word of a compact, simple, wholly naïve but oddly convincing statement of the history of *The Clarion* under the new management, of the troubles of its editors, of their present position. It was clear, it was concise, it was frank, it was intimate. It contained no false coloring or bid for sympathy. It contained only truth. It was perhaps one of the queerest pieces of proposed journalism ever produced, but it had in it a ring of genuine honesty of purpose and sincerity of desire to do right that took hold of the mind with gripping influence.

When Harry finished it he raised his head and said simply, "That's what I mean." And both girls stared at him.

"We call it our swan-song," said Marah smiling.

"Swan-song nothing!" exclaimed Harry. "You've just got hold in the right place for the

first time, that's all. I didn't know, myself, how it was with you; but you've been trying to trim, and it never gets across. This—this stuff is the real thing, that's all!"

Hallie would not have expressed it so; but she felt that Marah had somehow struck a key that satisfied her through and through, that stilled the disturbed feeling in her as nothing else had done. She felt suddenly almost light-hearted and the echo of Harry's slangy words told her why. "You've been trying to trim, but this is the real thing!"

That was a day of strange experience in the office. There was little business coming in and news was scarce. Harry, who explained his absence in the early morning by saying that his father kept him at home till he left on his motor trip, tried to do some late advertising soliciting, but found feeling too strong to encourage him. Even he was a little down-hearted when he came in late in the afternoon practically empty-handed.

Meantime the girls had got the "confession," as Marah persisted in calling it, into type and

had read the proofs. And whether it was to be swan-song or new battle-cry, the column of type was in the form on the stone, ready to print next day. Dick Sanderson, who was much pleased over the frank statement of his youthful employers, predicted a favorable impression for them, and he and Harry were quite in sympathy. This cheered the girls still more, but when Hallie detailed the whole plan to her mother that night, she found somehow that the spirit of it was lacking, and that she only produced the impression that the editors of *The Clarion* were whining to be spared in a situation they had created for themselves.

It was with something remaining over of this last feeling that she rose next morning, to one of the hottest days of that hot, dry summer, with the consciousness that this was press-day for perhaps the last paper she would help to issue.

As she went out into the street, Hallie was thinking that Oliver Oglesby had not been near *The Clarion* office since the night of the meeting at the opera house. She wondered what might be his latest activities and in what form would

appear his next attack on the water company. She believed thoroughly in his sincerity now, and she knew he would fight for what he wanted. She wondered how the battle of two men like Endicott Wiles and Oliver Oglesby would end; what would constitute real defeat for either who had to give up; whether right and justice to the community would eventually decide the issue or the weight of the money-power only.

She was musing on this matter when she reached the office. The front door was open, and, as she was early, she stepped in curiously to see if Marah was ahead of her. But when she saw her chum and partner standing in the midst of the office with Dick Sanderson, it was the expression on their faces rather than their presence there that astonished her.

Hallie walked to Marah's side and was scarcely greeted. Instead of a smiling nod and a cheery good-morning the older girl gave her a strange absent, startled stare, and then turned and pointed to the floor behind the imposing stone. Hallie walked around the end of the

stone, with the feeling one sometimes has in crises that it is very hard to see details clearly, and that the surprised and hurrying mind cannot take in a definite impression. And then she found herself standing still in the small aisle between the stone and one of the job-presses and gazing in stupefaction at a wreck that explained itself. The big forms of four pages intended for the day's newspaper had been swept off the stone, one of the big steel chases was broken where it had struck the base of the job-press, and the type—twenty-eight solid columns of news and advertising type, was spilled in such a mass that it looked as if no two letters in any single word remained together.

"That," said Marah slowly, as Hallie's eyes came up to hers, *"that is pi!"*

"How did it happen?" gasped Hallie breathless at the situation created—press-day and the whole of the local pages a hopeless mass of useless metal.

Dick pointed to the rear window. It was broken. "Somebody got in and did it," he explained needlessly.

"What for?"

"Maybe for ill-will; maybe to stop our confession," said Marah slowly.

"Our confession!" echoed Hallie.

"Yes—*it's* pi, too," answered her chum, quietly. Then she smiled, with rueful resignation. "Doesn't it look plural to you, too, Hallie?" she asked.

CHAPTER IX

OPEN HOSTILITIES

THE curtains of *The Clarion's* front windows were drawn. Behind them stood a whispering, excited group, Hallie, Marah, Harry, Dick, Claude Ellis and Rene Stiver—the whole of the newspaper's little force. Outside in the street, on the other side of the shaded glass, a second group considerably larger, made up mostly of men, stood regarding the big office window, with evident interest and some amusement, but with curiously lasting attention.

"Everybody who sees it brings somebody else to look!" whispered Harry, who had been peeping out through a crack between curtain and glass. "There's twenty people out there now and everybody in the street is beginning to take notice!"

"I told you, it would get 'em," asserted Dick Sanderson, his sandy head thrust eagerly forward for a glimpse out where Harry had looked.

"I never supposed so many—I only thought a few might care to read it," murmured Marah.

A good deal of talking was going on outside. There was some laughter, but not all the remarks caused amusement. Men came up the street or across from the opposite curb to see. Those near the glass made room for them and they moved up close. In the window hung a large sheet of white cardbord, conspicuous against the drawn green shade. In the middle of the sheet was pasted in three short parallel strips, about a column of printed matter, clipped and trimmed, and headed in bold letters:

TO THE PEOPLE OF PENTWATER

It was the "confession" of the editors of *The Clarion,* the type of which lay hopelessly "pied" and unprintable on the office floor, but galley-proofs of which, taken yesterday, had been cut to convenient shape and arranged for display in *The Clarion's* windows. And it was receiving serious attention—astonishing attention, Hallie and Marah thought; but only attention

that was to be expected, according to Harry and Dick.

But, in addition to the "confession," the office window also contained another printed sheet. It was the first page of *The Clarion,* with the paper's usual heading and date-lines at the top, but with the rest of the page entirely blank except for the center, where two huge black poster letters, four inches high, formed the single word *PI!* Under this word, of rather cabalistic appearance to the general public, were a dozen lines of ordinary print which tersely explained the situation in *The Clarion's* office, the mysterious wrecking of the day's paper, the impossibility of printing the usual edition and the ignorance of the publishers as to whose hand had struck so cowardly a blow at them. And at the very bottom of the paragraph two lines called attention to the fact that in *The Clarion's* window had been displayed a statement intended for printing that day, which would interest Pentwater people.

The copy in the window did not show it, but on each of three other pages in the paper, other-

wise blank, appeared the single word PI, while the remaining four pages of the usual eight-page sheet were made up of foreign ads, "grapevine" and "boiler-plate." And this was the paper that *The Clarion's* editors had that day posted to all their subscribers.

Inside the office, the day had been divided between the labor of preparing for these things and the Herculean task of clearing up the pied forms. No one who has never seen printer's pi, can have a clear notion of the hopelessness of it; but if you will count the separate letters in a single line on any newspaper page and multiply by the number of lines in the column, and then multiply again by seven for the number of columns on the page—nearly all newspapers have seven columns to the page—you will begin to gather a faint idea of what it would be like to try to pick up and sort out every separate letter *in four pages!*

As a matter of fact it was hopeless. It would cost more in time and labor to sort that type than it would to buy new fonts; and except for some of the larger display letters in advertisements

the whole mass was a total loss. Nearly all the news type in the office was in those pages, too. The damage done was considerable and the loss inflicted was serious, particularly in view of the other difficulties of the paper's young owners.

But spilled type being quite as little subject to the influence of tears as is spilled milk, there had been few tears. Just a few, perhaps, there had been, in the privacy of the sanctum, none at all in the open publicity of the shop.

"We may as well be resigned to ruin now," Marah had said.

But Harry had been digging out dusty type-catalogues and going into them with Dick, and it was he who had insisted on wiring an order to a Chicago type-founder for the filling of their most pressing needs.

"We'll see about paying for it when it comes," he asserted. "If they'll ship without a check, why we can print papers again and earn the money to pay; see? If they won't, we'll try the next thing."

Harry, indeed, was the life of the little party that day. It was he who had suggested the dis-

play of the "confession" and the printing of the paper with the cabalistic word to account for the lack of news.

"It'll give everybody something to talk about," he said, "and I wager a tin rattle to the hole in a doughnut that everybody in town will get that statement of yours, first or second hand, by to-morrow noon."

And the prophecy seemed on the way to swift fulfillment. The paper, issued earlier than usual, had not been out an hour before a score of men and women had read the statement in the shaded office window. Before five o'clock, general attention in the block seemed continually to be directed toward the display. Men stood in pairs and groups before stores across the street and pointed and stood talking. Women called each other's attention. Small, barefoot boys scampered across to look and wonder. Several motor-cars and carriages drove up and stopped at the curb, while some one got out, obviously to come and verify a report of the affair. And the little crowd of readers became

constant, at last. There was every evidence of interest.

Of course there were smiles. There were some guffaws. But there were looks on the faces of some of the better men and women of the village who came to read, that strangely thrilled the hearts of the watchers inside, as the readers turned away. Of course, watching had become the only occupation of the group behind the glass, by the time the group outside had become constant; and the thrills of excitement became queerly mixed with other emotions in Hallie's heart, as she saw Marah's "swan-song" show its vitality.

But the front door of the shop was kept locked during the later hours of the afternoon, and when closing time approached one after another of the little party inside crept quietly out the back way, through the alley and so homeward, leaving the gazing, commenting people still outside the front windows.

Two or three neighbors came to the little Rector home that night, but Hallie, who felt that she could not discuss the matter with them, fled

to her room and begged her mother to shield her from the necessity for that night. And so that press-day, which Hallie had thought might be her last, closed with a strange stir in the town over a pied paper, that had never been equalled by any regular edition.

Next morning, Marah and Hallie met at the corner above the office, peered into the street and saw one man standing before *The Clarion's* door, looking at that early hour, as if he might have been there all night. He proved to be Orville Lock, the town marshal, however, and their new day began with the unexpected. The marshal had a suspicion, he said, as to who had been guilty of the depredations at the newspaper office, and he wanted more details.

He was a short, heavy, dark man, with a leathery face and keen gray eyes. He had known Hallie and Marah for years and he looked at the two girls with a shrewd little smile, when the incidents of the previous day were mentioned. He did not comment on the "confession," but he nodded sagely over the broken back

window, the mass of spilled type and the split chase.

To his question as to the girls' own suspicions about their enemy, neither Marah nor Hallie had any reply to make. Hallie knew that, in the back of her brain, she could not but think that the one person who might really have desired to stop the printing of *The Clarion's* frank editorial statement, was most likely to be the only one who had objected to complete frankness from the first. But she could not admit even to herself, much less to Orville Lock, that she thought Endicott Wiles could be guilty of causing such a thing to be done, for such a purpose. And Mr. Lock went away, reserving his own opinion, but with the remark that he hoped to have more light on the affair before night.

But Orville Lock's early visit was only the beginning of visits that day. Among the first was Hugh Oliver, who came in his machine, just as he had on one other memorable day, strode into the office and said to Hallie that he "wished to renew his subscription to *The Clarion.*" He

went away quite as abruptly, but there were four other renewals that morning from people who had stopped the paper in the midst of the highest feeling against it.

Then there were telephonings and other calls, from men and women who had such things to say in the way of sympathy and approval, that Marah and Hallie were both quite as much abashed as pleased. Dr. Barrister, Blaine Ferris, Judge Winter, Morris Baldwin—a dozen or more of the town's best men took quite as much pains to utter hearty approval as some of them had taken to offer harsh criticism on an earlier occasion.

But it was near to noon of that eventful day that a check to stirring spirits came with the arrival of a telegram from Chicago, in answer to Harry's wire of the day before.

Sorry, can't ship on order without advance draft or reference.

"Without money, without type!" murmured Marah over the message. "We can't even try to go on so. Are we down and out yet, Harry?"

Just what Harry might have answered to that

query will never be known, for his reply was forever forestalled by the opening of the office door; and conversation and telegram alike were forgotten when the young people in the sanctum looked up to see who had arrived. For, in from the hot, dusty street, mopping his perspiring face with a damp handkerchief, and looking expectantly about with his keen hazel-gray eyes, came no less a personage than Simon Bepper himself, and behind him followed Winthrop Prase, Attorney Blaine Ferris and Martin Addison.

The members of the newspaper staff were too much surprised to speak. They did not speak, and not even Harry thought to bestir himself to look for seats for the newcomers. So Simon Bepper, having no one else to listen to, commenced rather promptly to speak:

"Young ladies," he began, "some of us have been reading and talking over the rather remarkable editorial you displayed in your window following the—ah, accident, in your shop yesterday. And, I may say, we are disposed to like it."

He paused, as if to give any one else who might wish to speak an opportunity. But no one else wished, so he continued.

"In the main we have liked the paper you have printed here. We had a very poor paper before you took hold of it; you made a good local paper out of it. I make no hesitation in saying, a *good* paper. Some of us did not approve of your policy in the handling of the water question, as you know. But, if you have the spirit indicated in your statement yesterday, and desire to run this paper in that spirit, some of us are heartily of the opinion that you deserve support."

He paused again. With sudden commotion Harry scrambled out of his chair and dragged it toward the old merchant.

"Say, sit down!" he cried.

He whirled to the other room and began lugging in two or three more chairs which stood there. The suddenness and noise of his movement created a laugh.

"Never mind, young man," said Winthrop Prase, "we shall not stay long."

"Humph!" cried Harry. "If you came to say anything like that, you don't think we're going to let you get away till you've said it, do you?"

Even Mr. Bepper smiled. But he went on quickly. "From your history of your relations with Mr. Wiles, it appears that he holds your note secured by this property for the amount of the investment here—except for a single thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir," murmured Marah, in first audible reply.

"Well, it's been that situation which has made you feel so much under obligation to Mr. Wiles that you could not say what you think about the water service in this town. To be quite short about it, a few of us here have made up our minds that we need the kind of paper you can give us here, too much to let that obligation handicap you. If you like, therefore, Mr. Ferris here is prepared to furnish you, on our behalf, the money to take up the loan and mortgage from Mr. Wiles, to furnish you a little added capital, which seems to be needed and to take a new mortgage for us on the same basis as

the old. And we do this in order that you may be free to run a paper *for* your town, and not against it. Does that meet your approval?"

There was a long moment of silence when the merchant finished, and Hallie Rector and Marah Whittlesey sat regarding each other and their visitors as if they had lost the power of opening their lips. It was after a full half minute, perhaps, that Hallie suddenly sighed aloud:

"Oh, Mr. Bepper!"

"You accept, then?" asked the old man, with his sharp abruptness.

Neither of the girls answered; but Harry looking from one to the other with wide, delighted eyes, was heard to murmur his opinion as to what would be the answer.

"Well, does a duck swim?" he queried, of nobody in particular, but with a tone that seemed to set the seal of finality upon the matter.

In another moment Blaine Ferris was drawlingly explaining at length what had led the merchants to their decision, what arrangements could be made, how entire freedom of management was to be assured and how everything was

to be arranged satisfactorily for the girls ultimately to own their own paper free and clear. And before the callers had been in the office twenty minutes the momentous thing looked like an almost accomplished fact.

"It only remains to settle with Mr. Wiles, then," was the way Mr. Ferris ended the discussion, "and as he'll have to accept money in exchange for your note, I don't see but this matter is settled."

The four men were upon their feet again almost before realization was clear to Hallie. She could hardly believe in the reality of the visit and the proposal, though the acceptance was quite as much a foregone conclusion as Harry's picturesque phrase represented it.

But as their new allies were lingering in the saying of a few final pleasantries, the younger editor saw past them through the front window, the arrival of a dusty motor at the curb outside, and the alighting of a man who had evidently come far and in haste. And before she could anticipate what the situation was about to become, Endicott Wiles himself was in the

office doorway, looking in astonishment from man to man of his fellow townsmen, and then at his son and at the girls.

Every one was silent for an instant. Then it was Harry who broke the uncomfortable pause.

"Hello, dad," he said, with entire lack of the air of respect. "We're conspiring against you."

"You look it," answered Endicott Wiles tersely. Evidently he was in no mood for diplomacy.

"We are simply here to offer to put these young ladies independently on their feet, Mr. Wiles," drawled Blaine Ferris.

"*Are* you?" questioned Mr. Wiles, with sudden genuine sharpness. "I call that meddling."

"That's where we differ with you, sir," said Simon Bepper with dignity. "We understand the situation thoroughly. These young ladies have demonstrated that they can make a good paper for us in this town and we want it. We simply desire to relieve them of an obligation that has handicapped them in handling one or two matters."

"Speak out straight, Bepper," said the bank-

er, his black eyes snapping fire now. "Is the Oglesby outfit behind this, too?"

"That's an unworthy slur, Wiles," said Winthrop Prase. "You'll repent that when you are cooler."

"Oglesby's got you all by the noses!" cried Endicott Wiles harshly. "This town has turned on me like a wolf-pack, and all because of a mass of lies—understand?—lies! Misrepresentation, misstatement of fact, coloring of circumstances—lies—that's what Oglesby and his crowd deal in. Why don't you try to find out the truth? Why don't you give me a chance to show you the facts? Why don't——?"

"Hold on, Wiles," said Blaine Ferris. "Don't excite yourself. Your manner shows how much in earnest you are and your own choice of this subject indicates plainly enough the place it is occupying just now in your thoughts. But it's too sore a subject for us to discuss this way. You've had too many, many months of opportunities to show this town that you meant well by it for us to be impressed now by your protestations. You may as well understand once

for all that we intend to get you—so far as your Water Company is concerned. Just how soon we are going to accomplish it, I can't say, but we're going to accomplish it. The Oglesby outfit, as you call it, is merely an incident in the fight. This newspaper is an incident! It may figure larger. But Oglesby or no Oglesby, newspaper or no newspaper, we're going to have water in this town. We're going to have water to drink and to bathe in, to sprinkle lawns and wet down streets, and we're going to have safety from fire—which we haven't got now. And finally, we're going to have *all* this at a price that is fair and right and we're going to stop making you rich in return for any trivial little trickle you choose to give us in the name of a water supply. Now, is that plain talk or isn't it? If it isn't I'll make it plainer by showing up some of the things I've been getting ready for you against the day of an accounting!"

The lawyer had grown quite as angry as his opponent while he spoke. He was a blue-eyed young man with prematurely gray shaggy hair. He was rather slender and keen-faced, a con-

trast in almost every way to the black-haired, black-eyed, robust Endicott Wiles. The two faced each other with hostile attitude almost suggestive of a readiness for blows, and, at the instant, they typified the situation that existed in the town.

It was a strange thing that came as an interruption between the two. Sometimes the dramatic thing happens in real life. Certainly it happened that day. Some strange commotion, rising outside in the street made itself heard in the little office. There were shouts. There was the noise of running feet. Men were seen to be pausing in their casual pursuits, to be turning with faces full of concern, to be listening to the immediate sounds and to something else, to be crying out suddenly themselves, and starting suddenly to run with noisy beat of feet and to wave their arms and spread alarm.

Some one sprang to the front door of the office which had blown shut, in the morning breeze which had somewhat cooled the air. As it was flung open, a lower, more distant sound than the shouting and the running feet, came in

like a wail of an animal in pain. And instantly every face in *The Clarion's* office changed with recognition of it.

"It's the siren!" cried Harry. "It's the whistle at the water-works! Fire!"

Endicott Wiles was the first of the group in the street. As he reached the walk, the others were close behind him. But a man, running heavily past recognized him only, and yelled wildly at him.

"Endicott Wiles!" he cried. "Do you hear it? It's fire! The Forsythe Hospital, they say! It's burning from cellar to roof—and there ain't no water! Do you hear? *There ain't no water in your pipes!*"

CHAPTER X

THE THINGS THAT COUNT

"HERE! Stand here! What's the use of running wildly in the street? You can't do anything!"

Phil Whittlesey had met his sister and her chum on the pavement before the Pentwater high school and had summarily taken charge of them. He had caught each of the girls by the arm and had swung them out of the pushing, thickening crowd under the smoky trees and pushed them toward the steps of the big building.

"Oh, Phil, is it really the hospital?" cried Marah, as the three climbed the stone stairs to a position of vantage, and turned back to look at the street, swarming now with people, clouded with dust, noise-filled, shadowy with the dark, drifting, ominous cloud overhead.

"Hospital? No! That is, not yet," replied Whittlesey, grimly. "It's Larry Lanster's

house, the Parley stables, Anderson's laundry and McIntosh's feed-barn. Nobody knows what it'll be next. The hospital is two blocks up Hibbard Avenue; but—the wind's that way."

"Where—how did it start?"

"Gas-leak in Anderson's basement!"

Phil Whittlesey, solid, substantial, self-reliant young chap that he was, showed a face that had strange little whitenesses about the mouth. Hallie Rector looked at him and knew that a deeper panic of fear was upon the town than men were voicing. As Phil stepped quickly back, waved his hand to them and plunged into the crowd again, she felt the grip of fright that was like a sharp contraction of muscles in her throat and chest and arms.

"And is there no water?" she cried out to a woman who stood near and had turned to look at them with scared preoccupied eyes.

"Eight streams! Aint' half force, though, It's gett'n' away from 'em."

Through the trees away to the right on the corner above them, at the very base of the west end hill, a fire-engine, glittering with polished

metal, was belching sparks up into the dancing, dodging, withering foliage of the trees. Its fluttering drone filled the air like the beat of drums. Out through the massed leaves smoke was oozing like a thick milky liquid from a squeezed sponge. Above the trees a heavy, rolling, bellying bank of vapor, yellow-brown beneath, whitening out against the hot sky-blue above was creeping high and higher. Under lower branches, far over past the belching engine, a rosy core of radiance, smoke-veiled till it looked like the fizzing foam of a red drink in an irridescent glass, was the window of a burning house. To the left again was a wide lawn, dotted with people, lined with reaches of black hose, the grass withered with brown dryness strangely significant now, with a stranger hint of sudden freshening where the spray of a leaking hose-joint was spattering. In the foreground two long, ragged lines of people crowded the pavements of the street, avoiding for the most part, even in the excitement of the moment, the roadway, banked ankle-deep with

dust, where black hose lay again, clotting with mud.

Men in loose attitudes of uncertainty, anxious-eyed, conversed in groups or moved about heavily, in the impatience of helplessness. Women with blowing hair and garments fluttering clustered in little parties, here one with fresh dainty morning dress gathered close, there another with kitchen apron wrapped about damp arms, all hushed and distressed, listening, waiting, watching the men and their activities in half restive patience. Excited boys raced the dooryards, shouting. Scared little girls stood behind closed gates, with dolls drooping from their momentarily forgetful arms. Dogs of high and low degree and pedigree barked in unison. A bell rang, its tone lifting and falling, swelling and diminishing with the drift of the gusty wind or the rise and fall of the din of engines. And over and under and through it all was a sound like the magnified roar of a sucking furnace draft—the inimitable sound of a big fire drawing its breath.

"I can never stand it here, Marah," mur-

mured Hallie. "The wind's toward the hill, and the head of the fire will be there. Let's go where we can see them fight it. I can't bear this."

Marah moved without a word. It was less than a quarter of an hour earlier that the two had stepped out into the street before the office of *The Clarion,* to look in frightened astonishment at the running figures in the roadway, and to see the men, who but a moment before, had been absorbed in the sharp debate in the shop, follow and become part of the gathering mob. Then they themselves had started, carried away by the touch of the panic, and, for the brief time since, they had been wandering, hand in hand, like children, trying to learn what so few seemed to know, trying to see and hear the real significance of the hundreds of sights and sounds, trying to find the heart of things.

They had learned that the first signal for the Anderson fire had been from a local engine house and quite unheard by them and that it was nearly half an hour after the first blaze

that the siren at the water-works had spread the general alarm. That and the dryness of everything in the town accounted for the terrible headway the flames had made. It was a conflagration that was justifying the dismay of the watching people. Four buildings were involved at the time that Phil Whittlesey had met them and given them their first authentic information, and the fear of widespread disaster needed no prophet. It was in the air.

"They say they've sent to Brighton for engines!"

"There's a bursted old main in Pearl Street!"

"Jack Inglis broke his hand in the fly-wheel of number two!"

"Did you see old Dan Roberts out on his roof with a bucket, spark-spotting?"

These were fragments of conversation the two girls heard from groups past which they pushed toward the droning, fire-dropping steamer at the corner above the high school.

"Lincoln Ardsley's house on Hibbard Avenue's been afire twice," a woman announced.

"I heard somebody say it was goin' to burn

up the whole hill!" cried a small boy momentarily restrained by parental hand.

"Pity Endicott Wiles' own house ain't on this side o' town," snarled a man who had found a place on a corner fence post where he could sit and cast remarks widespread into the crowd.

"He owns that string of cottages beginning at Fairmount!" cried some one else.

"Maybe he'll get a taste of his own medicine," said a quieter voice close to Hallie's ear, and she looked up to see the town marshal, Orville Lock, standing beside her. "Hello!" he added, immediately recognizing her. Then, "Say, I found out who pied yer type for you. Only it don't do much good now. It was Carey Trottle —but he's skipped town. He told Ben Pulsifer that he was goin' to do it, and Ben forgot to tell anybody else till this mornin'."

But it was odd how little Hallie cared for that information now. The horror of the great fire was upon her heart. Everything else seemed insignificant. While Orville Lock spoke, she was more keenly conscious of the drifting shadows dimming the sunny house front in the

yard behind him, than she was of his news. Her own home, and Marah's, far on the other side of the village, were safe, but she felt the weight of the menace for the people here as if it were a threat of personal danger. She could not remember afterwards what she had answered the marshal, or how she had left him, because, as they made their way up the street, the terror came in closer upon her and took hold of her consciousness and made her forget everything else but the battle going on before her.

No fire lines are preserved in the average small town as they are in a great city. The crowds press close upon the engines and the firemen. Many volunteers are usually among the fighters of the common enemy. Spectators may wander where they please.

Marah and Hallie came out from under the denser trees and saw the scarlet-windowed shell of a gutted house, roaring like a burning barrel on a bonfire. The side of a house next door was all yellow-white with the smoke of first ignition, from sill and cornice and clapboard, and was spotted with tiny saffron clumps of new

flames. A black mass of men in wet rubber were manning two streams, freshly turned upon it, and dark, hurrying, laboring figures were running and gesticulating like scared animals in the twilight about the corners of porches and on the roof, and dragging out fragile-looking bits of stuff from the front door, that was furniture but that somehow looked tiny and frivolous and worthless under the pall of the smoke cloud. Just beyond, a wagon standing in the street was being piled with things that were coming from the second house. The picket fence was afire almost beside the men with the lines of hose, and they were not heeding it. A fireman with a red-headed ax was crushing in the window of a smoking garage close to the rear of the lawn next to the gutted shell. A man in a red-piped shirt was driving a quiet, unfrightened team of black horses with sheared manes along the grassy extension at the roadside. A young fellow with a red, sweating face was wrenching desperately with a crooked bar at the top of a green-painted hydrant, from which led a flabby line of hose. Over everything was a murky light that red-

dened and smirched at once, but that gave unity to the whole picture.

As they moved on up the street, opposite the burning buildings, threading the crowd, they heard a man bawling unintelligible words somewhere on the road, and people repeated phrases breathlessly beside them. They heard again the statement that the water was failing, and felt wonder that people took such news so quietly. They looked at the spitting streams from the brass nozzles across the way, and tried to understand how these could show such force if the report were true. Then they heard the explanation in a phrase about seven streams being all that could be played at one time and that the whole west end was hopelessly doomed. And their own silent, shivering fright at the sense of helplessness which covered them like the smoke-cloud itself, explained the dumb acceptance of the facts by the crowd.

The smoke was black as evening dusk on the rising side of the hill. It sagged and fled along the ground and then clung lovingly to the corners of houses, as if the great roaring ravenous

beast behind had put out its vapory fingers to fondle the food it contemplated consuming. Shadow, like the forerunner of the thunder-storm, swept up the ascending avenue toward the rows of cottages and the hospital above. Sparks —not tiny specks of fading fire, but great red coals of chestnut-size—sprang high from the wings of leaping flame and carried with strange buoyancy over withered lawn and shingled roof, to start flame in new places, as if wherever they fell, dry surfaces instantly splashed fire. Paint cracked and smoked on house walls facing toward the wind and blaze, and curling vapors there suddenly transformed themselves into licking tongues of flame that lapped and mounted. Water hissed and beat and swashed and spatted, but the flames dodged their snaky heads and jumped higher. Glass burst janglingly from windows and the fire thrust out a huge red tongue where its presence had not been suspected. Men whooped directions, yelled alarms and bellowed dismay through the murk, and the sense of their presence there under all the welter appalled the watcher's heart.

The gutted house was Larry Lenster's. Next door Dan Roberts was unable to "spot the sparks" as fast as they came. His roof became too hot for him. His smoking garage seemed to whip all at once into flame. Behind his place, the shed at the rear of the house on the next street took fire, unquenchably, and from that the big house of the Hollabirds caught. Next to Roberts' place above, Ernest Van Dyne's modest home was scarcely behind its neighbor in showing the fatal red along its dark shingles, like a rash of swift infection. And the first of the Endicott Wiles row of cottages seemed fairly to suck in the flames through open windows. The fire spread in leaps and bounds. Along the dead grass it ran as if in rivulets. Trees seared, then blackened, then flamed. Sidewalks of wooden plank turned into beds of coal without attracting notice. Roofs falling, sent bursting, spreading fountains of fire high into the cloud above, to rain back upon the tinder-like face of everything.

Hallie and Marah reached a place above and opposite the first of the Wiles cottages. Hallie

never knew what chance directed them to the spot; but they found themselvs at the head of the fire. They came upon a denser group of people than was gathered lower down, and stopped there to look and listen. Panic was high now. Everywhere men were saying that the whole west end would go. Everywhere faces were white, some wet with unconcealed tears. Once a blood-flecked countenance of a wounded fireman appeared from somewhere out of the fight. Once again an unconscious figure, black and unrecognizable, was carried by and into a wide open yard behind, and it was said that Barry Craig was overcome with smoke. It was cried out that people were being carried from the hospital and that there was no expectation of saving the building. And, on the heels of this announcement, came the awful report—reiterated, too—that there were people there too ill to be removed.

How the time sped Hallie did not know after that. She saw with dazed eyes the leap and spread of the fire, the terror of the people, the desperate fight of the picked few. She saw the

formation of the bucket brigades, the arrival of the Brighton engines, the terrifying work of the hook and ladder crews who undertook to wreck a partially burned house. She saw the inefficiency of the force available against the flames. She heard the blame, the obliquy, the curses heaped hoarse-voiced upon the head of Endicott Wiles. She knew the water supply had proved utterly inadequate to this terrible emergency and that there was no reserve that could now be drawn upon. And she knew that for the conditions that had made possible this great catastrophe, Endicott Wiles was largely to blame. Finally, she knew that, if the fire were not stopped, there were bed-ridden people in the building at the crest of the hill who were going to die, either because of the necessity of moving them, or in the flames!

And it was when this extremity of horror came that she saw Endicott Wiles himself. She had scarcely thought of him as a human personage who might be present to take a hand in the fierce fight itself. Suddenly he appeared before her, hatless, quite near in the street; and

all at once she found men she knew—Blaine Ferris, Winthrop Prase, Marah's father and Phil, Harry Wiles and, yes, Oliver Oglesby himself, about the banker! And Endicott Wiles was leading, directing, dominating them.

What they were doing she did not know. Others were with these she recognized, and all together were bent upon some desperate plan that had made the crowd grow suddenly hushed and attentive, so that the crackle and roar and hiss of flame mounted above everything.

"What is it? What is it?" was the eager question all about. And then as the group in the road came close in to the side where the girls stood, the crowd pushed back and parted a little, and Harry Wiles passed very close with an armful of something Hallie could not recognize. And the boy's face was white and set, beaded with moisture, stained, and old as the men's about him. And just as he passed where Hallie could have touched him, the father whirled out of the group and shouted to him, and the watching girl had a vision of bloodshot eyes and gleaming teeth, and saw a wide patch

of raw red on the man's cheek where fire had touched; she saw a collarless shirt torn deep into the bosom, and clothes that were drenched and bedraggled with mud; she saw the hatless head, marked with strange gray where, on one side, the black hair was singed. And abruptly she was thinking how little money counted now —all of Endicott Wiles' money—and she suddenly found herself whispering prayers for the man who knew in the face of this calamity, that his own, and no other's, was the blame.

It was only a glimpse she had but she knew the tragic import of the terrible look in Endicott Wiles' bloodshot eyes. If no one else in all that throng felt with the desperate man in that moment of disaster, one young girl did—and it was because, she told herself simply, his fault and his present punishment differed only in degree from hers.

Hallie hardly realized what it meant when, with warning cries, men came, pushing the crowd back over the curb into the dooryards, yelling unintelligible instructions, ruthless in determined haste. But she knew, when she and

Marah, from the depths of a garden through which they were driven, looked back just in time to see one of Endicott Wiles' cottages appear suddenly to lift itself from its very foundation, burst with a million spurting smoke-founts and collapse like a flattened toy that is stepped on, while a crash like a hundred guns seemed to split the air about their heads and to rock the very paths under them.

"Dynamite!" somebody cried, and the crowd broke and fled.

It was the last resort. As Hallie and Marah made their way down the hill through a back street and away toward the office again, the recurrent boom of explosion after explosion, shook the very town. The Wiles cottages, one after another, were being leveled before the fire could reach them, and so the red ravening blaze-demon was being stopped at last. In twenty minutes the word came down from the hill above that the conflagration had been arrested.

And then came the aftermath in a hazy August afternoon when people stood in the village street and forgot business while they told

each other how the last blaze was dying, how the hospital and all the west end beyond were saved, and how Endicott Wiles himself had suggested and brought the dynamite to blow up his own houses, on which no fire insurance could be collected, of course, and which were, therefore, a total loss. And there was a queer cessation of cursings on the head of the man at whose door still lay, and must always lie, the blame for Pentwater's great fire. For another story came seeping through the crowd that, added to the dynamite tale, made the railings seem untimely. Barry Craig, the fireman who had been overcome by smoke, had been saved from death in the cellar of Larry Lenster's house, by a man who risked his life under a sagging, burning floor to get him. And that man's name was none other than Endicott Wiles.

That night, the north-bound express carried the man himself to Chicago for treatment for severe burns, it was said. Harry went with him. Also, it was rumored that one other person who had played a part in the little drama was on the

same train. Hallie and Marah did not immediately hear all the facts.

Next day, in their office, they talked again with Blaine Ferris, who alone now negotiated for "Simon Bepper *et al,*" as he called them. The result was that certain papers were signed and exchanged, and on that very afternoon there came from Brighton a linotype machine—which is a machine for setting much type at high speed and very economically—to take the place of the pied news fonts in *The Clarion* office. And when an operator therefor appeared also twelve hours later and certain electric-motor and gas connections had been made, a new *Clarion* began to be set up, that promised to interest the people of Pentwater as had no edition ever before printed in the town—possibly excepting only one.

It was three days before Harry came back. Then on a cool morning he walked in and sat down in the visitors' chair beside the big desk, with a characteristic grin of greeting.

"Say," he said, after the polite preliminaries, "my father has had enough of water companies;

he's sold out all his interests in Pentwater to the Oglesbys! Oliver went to Chicago with us, you know!"

"He has?" cried Marah, while Hallie sat with suddenly absorbed attention.

"Yes," said Harry. "What's more, he says that if you'll stand for it, he'll put up enough money to give me a share in the business here, besides making arrangements with Bepper and Prase and the rest, about your note."

Both girls nodded, as the boy paused tentatively. Then Harry went on.

"He says he'll write it all to you as soon as he can. He's got a bad wrist now—wrenched, you know, at the fire. But he told me to tell you that you were right and he was wrong." The boy paused again a moment, as if he found some sudden difficulty in speaking. Then, "Which," he added, "is as far as a man can go to square himself."

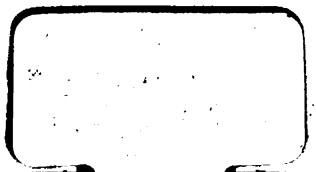
The three looked at each other solemnly for an instant. "Isn't he coming back to Pentwater, Harry?" asked Marah, suddenly.

"Oh yes," returned Harry; "and I don't think

anybody'll say now that he ought to be ashamed to live in his old town, do you?"

Neither girl answered in words, but Harry seemed satisfied. Presently he rose and stood with his hands on the desk and looked from one to the other. "Say," he said, "I used to be pretty smart about my father, calling him 'the old man' and 'dad,' as if he wasn't half a man. But, say, he wasn't the only chap in this town or in his family that learned something from that little flicker on the hill. I found out that my father's a man, he is!" The boy's eyes suddenly shone, and his face lost its pertness, as if the expression had been wiped from his features. "He's a man! I saw him at that fire and I know. He'd have traded his life or his money either that day to square the wrong he'd done, and he didn't hold back any minute on either. And, do you know, he's going to make good the losses of the folks that got burned out up there, over and above the insurance? So I guess I can afford to adopt him as a regular father now." Harry grinned. "You know, he sort of got me, at that fire. He

cared so much! You ought to have seen him."

"I did see him," answered Hallie, softly, remembering. "We both saw him. And I think I know—just how he felt."

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